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**‘SEX IS A JOURNEY’: AN EXAMINATION OF DISABILITY, SEX AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN ISIDORE OKPEWHO’S *THE LAST DUTY***

Aduse-Poku, Samuel

*Akenten Appiah-Menka University of Skills  
Training and Entrepreneurial Development*



**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the intersections between disability, sex and character development in Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*. Specifically, the paper focuses on Odibo’s sexual journey in order to show how the transformation the disabled character goes through in the area of his sexual life is critical to plot and character development in Okpewho’s novel. The study reveals that Odibo grows from being a seemingly asexual character to an individual who asserts his sexuality even in the face of challenges. Odibo’s sexual growth reaches its climax when he finally engages in sexual intercourse with Aku, an experience that helps him to embrace his masculinity. This study adds to the discussions on the intersections between sex and disability in the African literary texts by revealing how sex plays a key role in the development of the disabled character. The stages of sexual development presented in the paper also offer a way of understanding how the sexual life of Odibo contributes to the plot development of Okpewho’s novel.

**KEYWORDS**

Asexual, development, disability, intersections, sexuality

## Introduction

According to Christopher Krentz (2018), as research on disability continues to rise, there seems to be a special interest in ‘how gender, sexuality, race and class overlap, and in how social construction and chosen identities intersect’ (357). The intersection between disability and sex is of great importance. In his work on ‘The Sexual Politics of Disabled Masculinity,’ Tom Shakespeare (1999) examines the challenges disabled men go through in dealing with issues of disability and gender. To Shakespeare, the practice whereby disabled persons are pushed into the category of being asexual or even ‘a third gender’ has very negative consequences on the identity of such persons as well as the opportunities they get to enjoy in their respective communities. This categorisation is demeaning and leaves disabled persons conflicted as far as their images of themselves are concerned.

In *The Last Duty* (1996) by Isidore Okpewho, Odibo is presented as the character with a visible body difference, which becomes the reason why he is ‘othered’ by the other characters in the novel. Indeed, the social construction of a body considered to be ‘normal’ and one considered to be ‘extraordinary’ is the beginning of the creation of a social ‘other’ based on bodily configuration. As Garland-Thomson (2017) mentions, it is not the supposed ‘inherent physical flaws’ concerning one’s body that are the issue. It is how society considers some bodies as being perfect, while some bodies are considered as the ‘inferior other.’ Garland-Thomson’s idea of ‘the normate’ and ‘extraordinary bodies’ follows the concept of ‘othering.’ When it comes to othering, for the binary construction of ‘Otherness’ or ‘othering’ to occur, there is usually a ‘dominant in-group’ whose members elevate themselves to a place of relevance by pushing other groups to the domain of being ‘the Other’ (Brons, 2015; Staszak, 2018). This process of creating such divides in society is, therefore, premised on a perceived or real difference between the two groups. The dominant in-group, therefore, uses this ‘real or imagined’ difference to its advantage by using it as the basis for negating the identity of the ‘dominated out-group’ (Brons, 2015; Staszak, 2018). It is this same difference that becomes the reason why the dominated out-group is stigmatized and discriminated against.

By assigning bodies considered to be abnormal to an inferior position and placing on them the tag of being inferior and substandard, society begins to create classifications among bodies. Those whose bodies deviate from what the majority considers to be normal within a particular society or culture do not go without being noticed, uninterpreted, or even punished. Whereas those whose bodies conform to the ideal images of the normate get accepted, celebrated and rewarded. To match society’s concept of normal, therefore, is to be human, while to have any valued parts of the body missing or not functioning well, based on society’s normative construction of the body, is to be the ‘other.’ As a disabled character, therefore, sex becomes one key societal privilege that Odibo is initially denied participation in. This is as a result of the fact that people with perceived body differences usually suffer from societal stigma and stereotyping when it comes to that area (Acquaviva, 2020; Adom-Opare, 2022). According to Robert McRuer (2006), ‘disabled people’s access to sexual partners is further restricted by a pervasive cultural de-eroticisation of people with disabilities’ (4). This means that societies are usually structured in such a way that people who are considered different are denied participation in sexual activities.

In *The Last Duty*, Odibo, who is crippled in one arm, grows up having low self-esteem. Odibo serves as the errand boy of Toje, who considers himself to be one of the very important men of his community. Toje, who becomes impotent after sleeping with a prostitute, decides to test his potency on Aku. The choice of Aku as the object by which Toje tests his potency is very

deliberate. The first reason is that in the absence of Aku's husband, Toje becomes a key benefactor to Aku. This form of dependency, therefore, makes it difficult for Aku to deny Toje's sexual advancement. Indeed, Toje does not expect Aku to tell anybody about her escapades with another man while her husband is in prison.

While Toje's impotence can be explored in greater detail in the context of disability, in this study, I focus on Odibo's physical impairment since that becomes the basis for his othering. Indeed, as Garland-Thomson (1997) indicates, a 'disability's degree of visibility also affects social relations. An invisible disability, much like homosexual identity, always presents the dilemma of whether or when to come out or pass' (14). This means that, when that which makes one's body appear different is not very visible to the public, it serves as a protective shield for the individual within his or her society. Toje's impotence is, therefore, a form of invisible disability that is not easily recognised by the other characters in the novel and does not have an immediate effect on his social standing and relationships with the other characters in the novel.

As a disabled male, Odibo is placed right at the centre of a masculine test of sexual potency, which then becomes the basis for him to rediscover his masculinity. While referring to the important role sex plays in the Ghanaian society, Ennin (2022) states that 'sexual prowess' plays a key role when it comes to 'the ultimate test of masculinity' (95). The sexual relationship that develops between Odibo and Aku is initially not suspected by the members of the community. Again, Toje also does not seem to have any reason to be concerned about allowing Odibo to get close to Aku. In fact, this is not merely because Toje knows Odibo to be loyal. Odibo is initially presented in the novel as being asexual because of his impairment. This is because disabled men are usually considered to be asexual (Shakespeare, 1999).

*The Last Duty* by Isidore Okpewho is one of Nigeria's novels that has received a lot of critical attention. The novel, which focuses on life in Nigeria during the Biafran War, has gained attention for its thematic concerns. Indeed, various theories and concepts have been applied in examining the characters and themes of the novel. In their study of sexual exploitation in Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, Don Emenike and Success Asuzu (2023) used the feminist objectification theory to analyse certain instances in the novel that highlight the sexual exploitation of women within a war environment. Emenike and Asuzu's work centres on how some men use women to satisfy their sexual desires, especially during wartime. Imoh Abang Emenyi's (2006) study also examined how poverty is feminized. The study focused on the contribution of patriarchy to the deformation of women in *The Last Duty*. He posits that the structures society has put in place invariably push women to the 'periphery of existence' (90).

'Beyond Victimhood: Female Agency in Nigerian Civil War Novels' by Enajite Ojaruega (2021) presents a significant shift from various works on the Nigerian civil war narratives that focus on how females are part of the most vulnerable victims during wartime. Ojaruega's work presents a very important perspective that dwells on the female agency in such war novels. The work shows how women actively participate and positively contribute to the life and progress of society during such difficult times. Women are, therefore, moved away from the fringes of society and are presented as strong and helpful individuals who show so much resilience in the face of adversity and become key pillars to their families and societies in general.

Another aspect of Okpewho's *The Last Duty* that has received attention is the issue of masculinities. In his study, Chimdi Maduagwu (2013) focuses on the portrayal of men in Okpewho's *The Victims* and *The Last Duty*. This work is premised on the fact that gender is socially constructed. Hence, males are forced to live up to the expectations society has of them

based on their gender. The author reveals how males tend to accept their gendered roles and live their lives in an attempt to fulfil those expectations. On his part, Teiko (2023) examined the varied forms of masculinities portrayed by the male characters in the novel. His work reveals how almost all the male characters deviate from the concept of hegemonic masculinity. In their study of the same novel, Felicia Annin and Cynthia E. Osei (2020) focused on how the author uses dark humour to address the ills in Nigerian society. Their interpretation of the events of the text hinges on the fact that what the author exposes in the novel is meant to call for a change in society. Edwin Onwuka (2021), in his work, explored the representation of Nigerian soldiers in Okpewho's *The Last Duty* and Festus Iyayi's *Heroes*. Onwuka examines the character types, how they are depicted, and how such literary depictions can be impactful on the perception of the military in Nigeria.

From the foregoing, what is obvious is that most of the works that have been done on Okpewho's *The Last Duty* have focused on the issue of war. This is rightly so considering the fact that that is the main issue around which the whole story is built. Other studies have also focused on females with regard to the atrocities they go through during times of war. Aku, as a character, has been of key importance to studies that look at wartime sexual exploitation, feminization of poverty, as well as the challenges women go through when they find themselves in similar circumstances. These key thematic areas have gained attention in previous studies by other researchers. However, what appears lacking is a focused work that discusses the intersection between sex and character development in the novel. This study seeks to examine the sexual journey of Odibo through a close reading of the novel by showing how sex contributes greatly to the development of the disabled character in Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. The study goes beyond reading disability as a mere metaphor in the African novel by focusing on the real experiences of such characters, which tend to be overlooked. A critical look at such representations in literary texts is critical in helping to reveal the complexities that surround the sexuality of disabled persons.

### **Sex and Character Development**

In Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, the sexual journey of the disabled character plays a key role as far as the character development of Odibo is concerned. In the novel, Odibo's sexual journey is not static. The transformation he goes through in terms of his sexual life plays a critical role in the development of his character. A careful analysis of the stages Odibo goes through reveals how his sexual journey helps him to fully accept himself as a complete male. In this study, I group the sexual journey of Odibo into four critical stages.

### **The Perceived Asexual Stage**

I refer to the first stage of Odibo's sexual journey as the perceived asexual stage. During this stage of the narrative, Odibo is presented as having no interest in sexual activities. He does not appear to possess sexual feelings towards the opposite sex. This is a form of stereotype which is confirmed by Tobin Siebers assertion that, 'disability signifies sexual limitation, regardless of whether the physical and mental features of a given impairment affect the ability to have sex' (42). According to Shakespeare (1999), the perception that 'disabled men are perceived as safe is an example of biological reductionism' (62). In fact, having a sexual relationship with a woman does not appear to be something that Odibo is interested in or capable of having.

In the first stage of Odibo's sexual development, he is presented as a victim of stigmatisation and manipulation, which affects how he sees himself as a man. As a result of

being made to feel like an inferior male, Odibo decides to stay away from women who he thinks will only make his situation worse. At this stage, Odibo does not have a full understanding of what is going on between Toje and Aku. However, since Toje sends him on errands to Aku's house, Odibo is pushed into the situation of coming face-to-face with Aku. Odibo makes us aware that:

Ever since Toje became mixed up with Oshevire's wife. Calling me names in her very presence. Telling her I am no use to my hearing. Pointing to my crippled arm saying what I can do with only one arm. That I am useless, and that without him, I would be a dead man by now because I cannot fend for myself.' (60)

It is obvious that Toje intentionally denigrates Odibo in front of Aku in order to ensure that he never becomes desirable to Aku. Calling Odibo names in Aku's presence, referring to him as being of no use, pointing to his crippled arm, and saying that Odibo is useless are all ways Toje uses to keep Odibo from becoming a competitor. According to Tobin Siebers, 'sex may be the privileged domain of ability' (40). This means that the more Odibo is presented as being a worthless disabled person, the more undesirable he becomes as a potential sexual partner. To Siebers, 'sex appeal determines the opportunity to have sex' (41). Therefore, 'the greater a person's capacity to attract partners, the more opportunities to have sex' (41).

By deliberately speaking to Odibo in a demeaning way, Toje tries to assert his masculine power over him. Consequently, Odibo suffers from a damaged identity as a result of the embarrassment he suffers at the hands of Toje. Odibo is totally sidelined and made to feel useless before Aku. He is denied his place as a man and consequently has to depend on others for his survival. As a result of the insults, stigma, and pains Odibo suffers because of his body difference, he recoils into himself and tries to live life as 'the other'. As a man living in a society where physical defects make one a victim of stigmatisation, Odibo allows himself to suffer in the hands of other males but decides to stay away from women just for his own peace of mind.

Indeed, Toje and Aku's adulterous relationship marks a period of trauma for Odibo since it begins to trigger certain fears and insecurities that he had been harbouring all along. Odibo expresses his fears about Aku by telling us that, 'One day she too will laugh at me. Women are like that. And that is why all my life I have had nothing to do with any woman. It is bad enough with men. Women would only drive me to kill myself...' (61). These words reveal a deep-seated fear of Odibo, which is a result of how he has been made to see himself. While we may be tempted to condemn Odibo for stereotyping women, what he says rather pushes us to pity him instead of castigating him for the sexist comments. As a male living in a patriarchal society, Odibo is stripped of the privileges, power, honour, and dignity accorded to the so-called able-bodied men. He is, therefore, caught between not being a man with full masculine privileges and not being a woman, either. Whenever Aku is around, Toje intentionally commands Odibo around and shows him no respect at all. Odibo narrates how Toje commands him to 'Dress up the bed and get lost,' 'And to the woman, he would say, 'Oh, he is just a fool. All he's got is a big body but hardly any sense,' and all that kind of language' (138).

Odibo is described by Aku as having the 'unquestioning servility of a dog' despite his 'seeming hostility' (65). Aku attributes this way of behaviour to the fact that Odibo is crippled in one arm. Odibo manifests his discomfort when others, especially women, see his crippled arm. No wonder, according to Aku, Odibo makes 'every effort to hide his defect, casting furtive glances now and then as though he thought someone was about to unveil his stump of an arm'

(66). Odibo's crippled arm is therefore presented as being a great source of worry to him in his interactions with female normates due to the stigma associated with it. It is, therefore, not surprising that as he comes across people, he hides it so that it does not become visible to them.

In this phase of Odibo's life, he is presented as a character whose sexual feelings have been numbed because there appears not to be any possibility of Odibo ever having a sexual relationship with any woman. Toje therefore considers Odibo as one around whom Aku is safe since he cannot make any sexual advances towards her. To Tom Shakespeare (1999), the perception that disabled men are considered to be safe for females to be around without any sexual activity taking place is 'an example of biological reductionism' (62). Indeed, the fact that disabled persons struggle more with getting sexual partners than those considered to be normal has been well-acknowledged by several disability scholars (Ncube & Mtenje, 2019; Quayson, 2007; Shakespeare, 1999). It is, therefore, not surprising that Odibo grows up accepting what appears to be the reality.

Again, during this stage, Odibo's usefulness is presented as serving as an errand boy for Toje. He is seen as being innocent of whatever may be going on between Toje and Aku. This sense of naivety is most likely a result of his non-participation and lack of involvement in matters concerning sex. Indeed, he is made to see himself as one who is crippled in one arm and, as a result, is not worthy to be involved in sexual relationships. Undoubtedly, Odibo's perception of himself, the negative treatment he suffers, as well as the fears he entertains about women, play a key role in how he is relegated to the background, as well as how he stays away from having any form of amorous relationship with any woman.

### **The Stage of Discovering Sexual Feelings**

The second stage of Odibo's sexual transformation in the novel is what I refer to as the stage of discovering sexual feelings. This is the stage whereby, due to certain occurrences in the life of the disabled character, he is awakened to the reality of he not being asexual. At this point, Odibo begins to discover the innate sexual feelings that society has forced him to numb as a result of his impairment. This discovery stage is marked by how Odibo starts imagining and thinking about the possibility of participating in sexual activities in his society. The first thing that happens here is that Odibo's body becomes sexualized in the sense that it positively catches the attention of Aku. Here, regardless of Odibo's defect, Aku recognises Odibo's body as being worthy of admiration and also considers him a candidate for sexual activity. The disabled character, therefore, becomes visible to Aku, who is a normal female in a way that is not demeaning or patronising. In an encounter Aku has with Odibo, Aku describes him as 'a fine man' when 'in the negligence of sleep, he had not covered up his stumped arm properly, for it stuck out from under a fold of the cloth with which he had so anxiously hidden it when he had first entered' (73). Aku speaks of how 'the rest of' Odibo's 'body bespoke a man-now that, happily, sleep had stripped him of his pretense and thrown him bare to my stolen glance' (74).

Aku's statement signifies a departure from how Odibo's disabled body had been described as being 'worthless' by Toje. Odibo's body is consequently considered an object of beauty. Here, we see Aku, who is a member of the dominant in-group, affirming Odibo's body. Aku describes Odibo as being 'a fine man' whose body is worthy of admiration. It is interesting how it is during Odibo's time of vulnerability, when he is unable to pretend and cover up his supposed defect, that the beauty of his body is revealed. Odibo being asleep is, therefore, a strategy that the author uses to offer Aku the opportunity to properly gaze at the body of the

disabled character. The result of this is the conclusion that ‘the rest of’ Odibo’s ‘body bespoke a man. I argue that the admiration of the body of the disabled character symbolically cloaks Odibo with a sense of dignity, especially as far as Aku is concerned. Aku, as a normate, examines Odibo’s body and sees it as being worthy of admiration and acceptance. Indeed, it appears that without the permission of the normates, the ‘disabled other’ does not enjoy the privilege of participating in the sexual activities in his community. This is because it is the normates who constitute the dominant in-group in society who have the capacity to give any form of identity to the members of the dominated out-group (Staszak, 2008).

In the case of Odibo and Aku, the affirmation of Odibo clothes him with a positive identity that he had not even imagined to be possible. Indeed, it is from this point that we witness Odibo having an encounter with Aku that begins to lead him to discover himself sexually. Odibo’s discovery of his sexuality comes after he also gets to see and admire Aku’s body. This becomes possible due to the errands Odibo runs for Toje. It is the running of errands for Toje by Odibo that enables him to get closer to a woman, albeit unwillingly. As Odibo is forced to be in the same space with Aku, Odibo begins to take a closer look at Aku’s body and ‘eyed her furtively as he ‘watched her pass by to the bedroom’ (135). Odibo watches Aku with ‘a wrapper tied to her body, reaching from the breasts to just below the knee and exposing the upper part of the breasts and the beautiful legs and toes... I swallowed as I saw these things’ (135).

In this second stage of Odibo’s sexual journey, the discovery of sexual feeling is closely connected to an external element that serves as a trigger of emotions within the disabled character. In the case of Odibo, he is accidentally exposed to the body of a woman in a way that leaves a lasting impression on him. On one particular occasion, Aku’s son mistakenly opens the door at a time when his mother is completely naked. Coincidentally, Odibo was looking in that direction as the door opened:

He pushed the door open-and there it was. The full naked form of the woman! Once drawn to the sight, my eyes could not of their own natural will detach themselves from the wonder that confronted them: a trunk smooth as a pebble, bristling womanhood and a lot of hair where it should be!... something went through me that I had never felt before...(135-136)

The exposure to Aku’s body ignites in Odibo the long-bottled-up sexual feelings that earlier appeared non-existent. The exposure to the naked body, therefore, serves as a trigger that makes Odibo realise that he is not asexual after all. Odibo’s confession that ‘something went through me that I had never felt before’ is, therefore, a testament to how that experience contributes greatly to sowing a desire in him, which causes him to also start desiring a sexual relationship with a woman. Still referring to this incident, Odibo further mentions that, ‘I am not even in total control of my thoughts...the figure that hit my eyes only a while ago, the picture which now can never leave my mind’ (137).

Indeed, the naked body of Aku leaves a picture in Odibo’s mind that begins his transformation. We begin to see, from this point, a character who, regardless of his defect and what he used to think about women, begins to have sexual desires running through him. This lasting impression, therefore, sows in Odibo a desire for the opposite sex. It can be realised that as Odibo’s sexual desires get triggered, he begins to fantasize about Aku. This is what then sets him thinking and even wondering about what Toje might have been doing with Aku. In an instance where Odibo gets the opportunity to enter Aku’s room, he expresses this sentiment:

It is a nice bed,' I say, feeling the bed, while a slight sensation runs through me. *Maybe she sleeps naked. And she would be quite a sight. Could she ever want me near her?* I sit down at the edge of the bed. What can Toje be doing now with Oshevire's wife in my place? (141)

Odibo begins to move from being an outsider as far as sexual activities that go on around him are concerned to a point where he indicates the sensation that runs through him even at the mere sight of Aku's bed. The disabled character also grows to a stage where he begins to fantasize about the female body and also considers the possibility of sleeping near Aku on the same bed. In fact, Odibo even starts to exhibit tendencies of jealousy and pride in terms of how Toje was seeking to outwit him. Odibo tells us:

My hatred for Toje grows more and more every minute. I wish I could hurt him. I wish very badly that I could do something that would really hurt his pride. And then he would know what it means to make me feel the way I do when he does those things that he does to me. (144)

As Odibo becomes more sexualized, therefore, the more he grows in his pride as a man who is even willing to hurt another man because of a woman.

### **Unfulfilled Desires**

The next stage of Odibo's sexual development is marked by the revelation of the unfulfilled sexual desire of Aku as a result of Toje's impotence. At this stage, it becomes clear that Toje, who arouses the sexual feelings of Aku, is unable to satisfy her due to his impotence. This causes a feeling of frustration in Aku because of what her body has been through. This, therefore, sets the tone for how Odibo will eventually step in to prove himself as a more capable man than Toje. Aku narrates what she goes through at the hands of Toje during one of their encounters:

...with his hand he explored my groin with such blind vigour that at the end of the whole affair, not only was I left with a passion only rudely tickled, but indeed not even the little resistance that my body put up could save me from the resultant trickle of blood. As usual, he did nothing beyond that. (157-158)

This depiction of Toje presents him as being weak and incapable of satisfying Aku, even though he tries several times to have a sexual affair with. By not being able to do anything beyond leaving Aku's body with passion 'only rudely tickled,' Toje's impotence becomes symbolic of a lack of power. He leaves a job that is meant to help him to assert his masculinity, undone. This, therefore, renders him as not being man enough because he is unable to conquer Aku's body. To Toje, he cannot live 'with the deep personal knowledge that the most important man in the town is impotent' (175).

Consequently, it is Toje's failure that makes room for Odibo to be noticed by Aku. Aku states that, 'I had instinctively raised my hands to his shoulders for support, and rested my head against his chest. He did not move. He just let me hold on to him like that, not objecting in the least' (p. 159). It is important to note that at this stage, Odibo's impairment becomes of no significance. He is seen and compared to another male who possesses qualities that a female desires. Again, what Aku tells us establishes the fact of mutual admiration that occurs between

Aku and Odibo. Aku acknowledges the ‘quick sensation that runs through’ her body as something she had not experienced for years. According to Garland-Thomson, ‘to be granted full human status by normates, disabled people must learn to manage relationships from the beginning. In other words, disabled people must use charm, intimidation, ardor, deference, humor, or entertainment to relieve nondisabled people of their discomfort’ (13). I argue that the ‘billy-goat’ smell of Odibo, which revives in Aku a feeling she had not known for years, can be interpreted as a mark of masculinity. Indeed, the sense of ‘security, ungrudging support, billy-goat smell’ (159) and the quick sensation Aku experiences end up elevating Odibo as a great embodiment of who a male is. This also ‘revived’ in Aku a feeling [she] had not known for years’ (p. 159). Unfortunately, Toje never gets to be described in this positive way by Aku.

At this point, Odibo begins to appear as a more suitable partner for Aku, as far as her desire for sexual satisfaction is concerned. In fact, as Aku begins to desire Odibo sexually, memories of ‘the endless loneliness,’ ‘lack of protection,’ ‘interminable anxiety,’ ‘loss of comfort,’ ‘the shame of living under the animal lust of Toje,’ who only awakens passion but is unable to complete the process, which are all characteristics of the state in which she finds herself, begins to come to Aku’s mind:

I began to go over in my mind the painful life that I had been subjected to living since they took my man away... The total shame of living under the shadow of the animal lust of a man who merely tantalized desire in me, causing me to live only by thrift of passion when passion would want to overflow...’ (161)

Aku further reveals how Toje loses value in her sight as a result of his inability to complete whatever he starts with her. Aku begins to wonder if Toje ‘lacked true manly powers?’ (161) and begins to ‘wish that someday he would summon up the power to slake the desire that he was continually working up in me!’ (161-162). Indeed, the use of ‘power’ by Aku at this stage is in reference to a man’s ability to have sex with a female. Sex is therefore presented as a symbol of ‘true manly powers.’ Therefore, for Toje as a perceived normate to be impotent is for him to be considered to have lost the ‘power’ that makes him an able man. This is why Aku ashamedly begins to hope that Toje will be able to someday ‘summon up power to slake the desire that he was continually working up’ in her.

### **Filling the Vacuum**

It is in the midst of the revelation of Toje’s powerlessness that Odibo steps in. This is a stage of adventure for him as a disabled character, as he seeks to act on his sexual desires. At a time when Odibo assumes that Aku is asleep, he sneaks into Aku’s room. Aku reveals that:

I felt my own hand playing with my groin! And it was in the midst of this act of self-disgrace that I heard the door of the other room creak...I stopped...I saw the dim silhouette of Odibo slowly emerge through the door. He was picking his steps very carefully. As he came nearer and nearer, I noticed that he was bare to the waist, with his cloth wrapped round his loin. He came closer and closer to my bed. I could now see him in full view. The stump of what should have been his left arm. His imposing build. The swell of his shoulders and of the biceps of his right arm the wrapper of his trunk...He was every inch a man-his manhood scarcely faulted by the unfortunate loss of an arm. (162)

The image of Odibo as presented at this stage is that of one whose manhood is ‘scarcely faulted by the unfortunate loss of an arm.’ In fact, Aku only refers to Odibo’s crippled arm in passing as she focuses on Odibo’s ‘imposing build,’ ‘the swell of his shoulders and of the biceps of his right arm’, which leads her to conclude that Odibo is ‘every inch a man.’ A juxtaposition of Aku’s reference to Toje’s powerlessness with his acclamation of Odibo’s manhood reveals how the disabled character appreciates certain features he possesses that are lacking in the body of the perceived normate male. While referring to Odibo’s visit to her room, Aku further describes that:

I could feel his eyes all over me. I was completely nude. Only an edge of my cover-cloth sheltered my groin. Slowly he bent his head over me, and then proceeded to run his nose over my body-now over my thighs, now over my breasts, over my belly, then down again to my thighs. He raised his hand, and was about to run it over me, when on sudden instinct I jerked. He quickly withheld his hand, and raised himself to full standing position. I rolled over on my side, facing him fully now, but still pretending to be asleep and unaware of his presence. (162-163)

What is obvious is how Odibo is presented as lacking any morals. In fact, knowing very well that Aku was a married woman, Odibo’s attempt to spy on her presents him as being a sexual pervert, which feeds into a form of negative disability stereotype. That Odibo becomes so consumed with getting to see Aku’s naked body that he does not care about being caught also gives him an image of being careless, stupid, and naïve. The actions he engages in as he sees Aku’s body, such as running his nose over the woman’s naked body, over her thighs, breasts, and belly, only succeed in presenting Odibo as someone who is a threat. However, the revelation of Aku as a willing accomplice rather seeks to suggest that while Odibo’s actions are not justifiable, they were meant to serve a need. This is a mutual need shared by both Odibo and Aku.

As this stage of Odibo’s sexual development comes to an end, he is presented as possessing manly powers. Aku is, therefore, ready to offer herself to Odibo because she considers him to be man enough. At this point, the sexual desires of Odibo, which Aku describes as ‘had since lain concealed under what I had always seen him: natural desires encumbered only by his subjugation to Toje’ (163), become known. It, therefore, becomes obvious that for Odibo to become sexually liberated, he has to break free from the control of Toje. Interestingly, due to all that Aku goes through at the hands of Toje, she also desires somebody to set her free from sexual starvation. It is, therefore, not surprising that Aku describes Odibo and herself as being ‘prisoners of circumstances.’ For Aku, her desires have been awakened by Toje, who is unable to finish what he starts, while in the case of Odibo, Toje’s subjugation has caused him to see his body as unworthy of sexual desires and pleasure. Aku, therefore, needs a man to satisfy her sexual longings to make her feel like a woman. This is a desire she is ready to risk everything to achieve. Odibo is also presented as being on a journey to discover himself as a male who has sexual desires.

### **Sex as an Epiphany of Masculinity**

Sex serves as an epiphany of masculinity for Odibo in his sexual development in *The Last Duty*. At this stage of Odibo’s sexual transformation, he realises that he is indeed a full man after he engages in sexual activity. This is the point where Odibo, as a disabled character, breaks all the societal barriers to participate in the sexual activities that go on in his society. This becomes both liberating and an eye-opener for Odibo, who never imagined that he would ever enjoy such a

privilege. Indeed, having sex with a woman, a supposed superior male, was unable to ‘conquer’ sexually ends the battle for superiority. Sex, therefore, becomes a symbol of power for Odibo as a male character, just as it is the case in other societies (Ennin, 2021; Shakespeare, 1999). In fact, having sex with Aku becomes the greatest epiphany for Odibo as far as his masculinity is concerned. Narrating his life before he has sex, Odibo relives this unimaginable experience:

How much does it take to be a man, bedside knowing that someone takes good and healthy notice of your manhood, and you can come out and receive the fresh, beautiful morning air full in your face without fearing that some other man would take you to task for it? For too long I have felt my body engaged in fear. Ever since I grew up to be aware of my physical deformity. I have lived a life of slavish caution, hiding the stump of my arm, talking very little, giving human beings a good speechless distance, and what’s worse-avoiding women in the strange fear that they would make little of my manhood and of me. (180)

It is obvious how, at this stage in Odibo’s sexual development, his body moves from being mournable and pitiable to becoming something that one can cherish. The experience sets him free from the fears, caution, and challenges of growing up with a physical deformity imposed on him. It is only at this point that his ‘late father’s words that God never does a job halfway’ become meaningful to him. Odibo confesses that:

Besides, growing up in the shadow of my late father’s words that God never does a job half-way, I have always carefully restrained my impulses in the belief that I could never achieve anything however hard I might wish to try. I have lived a false existence, a prowling shadow, bashful, timorous, without a voice, without a face, without any kind of identity. (180)

Regarding his sexual intercourse with Aku, Odibo tells us that, ‘I fell upon her lap and knew desire. When it was all over, she sighed deeply and said ‘Thank you.’ I felt mystified by those words, and even more so by the smile that I saw on her face’ (181). Odibo’s statement on how he feels after having sex with Aku is a great revelation of the powerful effect of sex in setting Odibo free and making him feel like a complete man. After engaging in sex, Odibo begins to see the world differently compared to the inferiority complex he had as a result of his deformity. He exclaims that:

Now, all that is gone. Gone! Now I know that I am a man like any other man. I have desires that should be satisfied, impulses that should be realised, and my big strong body is no longer there for nothing-‘ineffective’, as Toje has always told me to my face. After that woman let me into her body, I experienced a release of my long pent-up passion, I felt my whole body-my whole personality-loosen, and my entire being change. Now when Toje calls me a useless mass I am simply going to swallow his words without care, for I know the world has been thrown wide open to me. (180-181)

Indeed, not only does sex release Odibo from his insecurities as a man, but it also opens the world wide open for him. Sex becomes the key to a world of endless possibilities for Odibo. He further indicates that:

The outcome of my visit to the woman had exceeded my wildest dreams-if I had ever had any. Something had happened to me that even my dreams could never have entertained. For a brief spell, I was gripped with fear that I had set myself on a dangerous course and that I was doomed if Toje ever got to know what I had done. But then – I shook myself up. Gradually I began to feel my mind, my whole thinking, liberated from its habitual prison. (181)

The liberating force of sexual intercourse also ensures that Odibo breaks free from the ‘habitual prison’ of Toje. For Odibo, therefore, sex becomes an experience that exceeds his wildest imagination. He indicates that ‘Something had happened to me that even my dreams could never have entertained.’ To Odibo, the highest form of satisfaction he ever had in his life was to have a woman on his bed and have sex with her. He exclaims:

This is heaven! To have a woman sharing my bed with me and not only not unwilling to wallow in such lowly circumstances but indeed loving every moment of it and addressing me in language I could have sworn I would never hear! This must be heaven (204)

After having sex with Aku, Odibo becomes liberated from the notions of worthlessness he had been made to regard himself. Odibo is also presented as having sex with Aku as a way of taking revenge on Toje. Odibo breaks free from the stigma and negative stereotyping he suffers as a result of his impairment. Odibo tells us:

Anyway, I had a raw deal from Toje far too long. I had too long taken a beating I never deserved. It was he that made me so painfully aware of my defect. If it wasn’t for him the saying that God never left a job half-done would have had an entirely different meaning for me. It was he that had chained my mind, my whole being. And now that I knew better than I ever did, I was glad to have taken my revenge on him-glad to have registered the mark of my personality on at least one thing that seemed to have put him in such an awesome advantage over me. (182).

Again, after the sexual epiphany, Odibo begins to look for ways to survive without depending on Toje. This is a way of affirming himself as a complete male who does not need to depend on somebody else in order to survive. Talking about his future, Odibo mentions that:

I knew life was not easy for a man with one arm, but it certainly wasn’t hopeless. God was sure to lend a hand at some point. With a little help from Him. I might yet achieve enough for my needs and work out my own life like everybody else. God, indeed, never left a job half-done!’ (182-183)

Ultimately, it is sex that helps Odibo to accept himself as a man. Sex, therefore, does not only serve as a form of pleasure for him but also as a way by which he overcomes Toje in their attempt to prove their masculinities. At the end of the novel, it is Odibo who succeeds in showing his ‘manly powers’ through his ability to satisfy Aku sexually.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examined the critical role of sex towards the character development of Odibo in Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*. The analysis showed that sex serves as a key symbol of masculinity

in the novel. Sex becomes the door through which Odibo, the character with a visible impairment, embraces his masculinity and breaks free from the stigma associated with his disability. The study has also shown that Odibo grows from being a perceived asexual character to an active participant in the sexual activities in his society. Indeed, this study has demonstrated how the sexual life of the disabled character is what drives the plot development of *The Last Duty*. To ignore this is to miss a very important part of the novel. There is a need for future studies to focus on how such styles of writing enforce or help to deal with disability stereotypes.

### Author Bio

**Samuel Aduse-Poku** holds a PhD in Literature in English. He is currently a Lecturer in the Department of Languages Education at the University of Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development (USTED), Kumasi, where he teaches Introduction to Literature, Introduction to African Literature, Critical Issues in African Literature, Cultural Studies, West African Poetry, Voices and Perspectives, among other courses. His research interests include Disability Studies, Trauma, Identity in African Literature, and Cultural Studies.

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