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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON FEMALE NIGERIAN WRITERS

Editors
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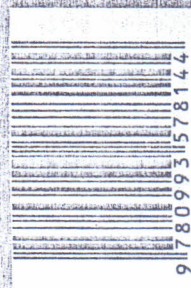
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Introduction

Since the 1970s, attention has been paid to the work of female writers in Nigeria. The 1970s saw the emergence of a new generation of female writers who were not only writing for women but also for men. The 1980s saw the emergence of a new generation of female writers who were not only writing for women but also for men. The 1990s saw the emergence of a new generation of female writers who were not only writing for women but also for men. The 2000s saw the emergence of a new generation of female writers who were not only writing for women but also for men. The 2010s saw the emergence of a new generation of female writers who were not only writing for women but also for men. The 2020s saw the emergence of a new generation of female writers who were not only writing for women but also for men.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part contains a collection of essays on the work of female writers in Nigeria. The second part contains a collection of essays on the work of female writers in Nigeria. The book is divided into two parts. The first part contains a collection of essays on the work of female writers in Nigeria. The second part contains a collection of essays on the work of female writers in Nigeria. The book is divided into two parts. The first part contains a collection of essays on the work of female writers in Nigeria. The second part contains a collection of essays on the work of female writers in Nigeria.

Foreword by Oluwafemi O. Oluwalanle
Introduction by Oluwafemi O. Oluwalanle



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INTRODUCTION

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON NIGERIAN FEMALE WRITERS

Since the 1970s, a significant number of women have engaged themselves with the discussion of female identity, its stability and the meaningful roles of woman within the Nigerian society. Recognised writers like Zulu Sofola, Stella Oyedepo, Zainab Alkali, Mabel Ekwierhoma, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Tess-Onwueme, Chima Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, Osita Ezenwanebe, Julie Okoh, Onyeka Onyekuba and many others have highlighted female creativity from the feminist angle. As feminism became a fertile ground through which these selected women writers analyse their works, several scholars have researched using different shades of feminism such as black feminism, motherism, STIWANism, femalism, Africana womanism, womanism amongst others. Most female writers agree that sexism and classism are inextricably bound together and cannot be ignored in the exploration of gender discourse. Thus, the feminist theories from different perspectives have helped the black women to feel represented in dominant discourses; to create a self-defined voice for themselves and to discuss their own meaning of womanhood through their own creativities.

Also, the issue of sexualisation and engendering is germane in understanding the socio-cultural importance of the history of

1(1); 66-79.

Ojediran, O. (2013). "Womanist aesthetics of assertiveness in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods, The Performer: Ilorin Journal of The Performing Arts*, 15(6); 56-67

Orjinta, A. (2013). *Womanism as a Method of Literary Text Interpretation: A Study of Emergent Women's Images under Religious Structures in Selected Works of Heinrich Böll*, Inaugural-Disseration zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophie an der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, München. Nsukka, Nigeria: University of Nigeria Press Ltd.

THIRTEEN

THE STATUS AND IMAGE OF WOMEN IN SELECTED WORKS OF NIGERIAN WRITERS

Oludolapo OJEDIRAN

Literatures by and on women are still emerging, as the debates on their relevance have become more engaging. There have been increasing revelation of the transformation and changes to the social images and identity of women, as revealed in successive conferences devoted to women's issues. Starting from the First World Conference on Women in 1975 at Mexico City to the Second World Conference on Women at Copenhagen in 1980, the Third World Conference on Women in 1985, and the Beijing conference of 1995, the importance of literatures on women has become more emphasized.

The Beijing conference of 1995 titled Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace, created in the mind of women the agitational consciousness to gain the needed freedom and voice in any patriarchal society. Although there had been meetings, workshops and views from women who see male domination, female autonomy and ownership of their

beings as something that needs to be revisited, the outcome has not been positive like that of 1995 where women became more aware of what needed to be done. While Beijing Conference deliberated on women's empowerment and equality between women and men, several literatures by female writers that came up after the conference started taking more assertive positions in order to reflect how a woman should live and be empowered within a phallic society.

While this work is not on the overview on women's conferences that have taken place or yet to be organized, such conferences are often seen as an avenue that created chances for women to be outspoken and a way of negotiating the public sphere which is the male domain. Ironically, such conferences are seen as platforms where values and women's conditions are recognised and where they discuss which invariably affects the writings of the female gender. Obafemi (1989: 42) advises Sofola that:

It is high time Zulu Sofola used the position of influence and pre-eminence she enjoys as a leading female dramatist in Nigeria, to positive and pertinent ends. She must move away from old school and depict realities of today. Rather than advocate the continued subjugation of the female folk in particular and humanity in general... she should strive towards the emancipation of her sex, in particular, and the liberation of humanity in general, from enslaving codes icons and ideas.

As the first published Nigerian female playwright, Sofola enjoyed patronages from male and female readers, some out of curiosity and others out of joy. Her early plays *King Emene*, *Old Wine* are

Tasty, and *Wedlock of the Gods* tend towards protecting cultural values laid down by men. However, after much discourse about writing to create females with stereotypic perspectives about womanhood, she wrote *The Ivory Tower* (unpublished). She created Kemetia, a female with zeal and passion who fight against cultism in the University. Getting her inspiration from African heroines such as Moremi of Ile-Ife, Queen Amina of Zazzau and Winnie Mandela of South Africa, Kemetia is depicted as a woman of action. Through this character, Sofola presents to the readers how a woman should be motivated to rise against female marginalisation and male egoistic domination. While some female writers write to create a gender-balanced society, others write to create the positive images for women by giving their female characters the social awareness of identity and self-assertion. Recently, Obafemi and Yerima (2004: 55) agree that Sofola's:

Mastery in handling the strengths and weaknesses of her women is what makes her tragic plays socially realistic. Being a woman herself, Sofola writes from an intimate knowledge of her female characters. But from her many plays with dominating female characters, it is the traditional plays and the portrayal of the female characters that have been most successful. The reason for this is that Sofola's perception of what her plays advocate, regarding the cause of the modern woman, is often not agreeable with the modern feminist ideological persuasion.

This is explicit in Sofola's characters, Odibei and Obiageli in *Wedlock of the Gods*, whom she portrays as women who are traditional in their outlook. Creating tragic scenarios for both

characters brings out their traditional maternal instinct within the patriarchal culture that cherishes male children. Ironically, while Sofola tries to see these women as active, vengeful and embittered, their anger is directed at other women and not the patriarchal system.

However, whilst women are being victimised all over the globe, the Third World women are more at the receiving end than those of the Western world. Women are victimised not only by the men but also by themselves, which is one of the thematic considerations of discourse in works by female writers. While this collection deals mainly with the Nigerian women, it also reveals that irrespective of ethnicity, background, race, colour, age, qualification, and status, amongst other matters, women issues are the same because they are in an enclosed patriarchal system; going through the same agonies and uncertainty and obeying the same laws. Though, so many things have changed in most societies especially in the Western world through Women's Rights movements, the Nigerian system is only just gradually following suit.

Within the creation of literary works, sexual, economic, emotional, cultural and social exploitations are seen in different dramatic forms. As this work views the female literary traditions as the medium through which women's victimisations and subjugations are exposed, such works also provide alternative positions to women's existence in the patriarchal system. Such alternatives are identified by Abacha (1997:20):

Women, as wives, mothers and family members have a duty not only to protect the core values of society, but to ensure that they propagate such values through

the process of socialization and information dissemination... In a world where information is power, access to control over and sharing of information and knowledge are crucial elements in women's participation and empowerment.

Abacha sees that women have specific roles to play in the attainment of self-empowerment by using the information they pass across from one generation to the other for themselves. Women should not only be cultural projectors, rather they should use such projected cultural values to protect and fight for themselves. For example, Ebikere's character in Julie Okoh's *Edewede* and Adesua in *Aisha* are presented as mothers who protect cultural values over femalehood. They see culture as something that supersedes any human being despite that culture is never static, that some cultural norms could be limiting and retrogressive or passive and subservient with women at the receiving end. Okoh presents binary characters who can go against such subservient cultural practices. *Edewede* in *Edewede* is seen as a woman of zeal, self-determination and uncompromising attitudes which leads to her repudiation, but at the end, she is able to fight for the needed freedom. Iriata summarises this in the play that:

We are women. We love being women, wives and mothers. But each woman wants to be herself, think for herself and express herself in her own way as a unique being. Circumcision takes these rights from us, makes us objects. Today, we reject that status. We no longer live simply following the ideas handed over to us. So, ban circumcision, real *Edewede*'s repudiation or forget about us (p. 44).

Affirmative / Independent Woman

Affirmative and independent female characters show that Nigerian women are ready and prepared to change their positions from the docile, inaudible and voiceless to the affirmative and socially independent woman who can be in spaces of authority. Such women take their place of power and can be seen as a woman of substance filled with integrity, dignity and personality. Rather than being socio-culturally or religiously suppressed, the women are ready to boldly showcase and celebrate their gender. This category of women is presented as individuals or people who, despite the limitations of the patriarchal culture, refuse to be suppressed, dominated and muted. Nwapa (2007: 527) gives an answer to how African writers project women in their works. She sees that "a few of them have tried to project an objective image of women, an image that reflects the reality of women's role in the society". Yet some writers still create women who are caricatures of human existence. For example, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's part as the traditional head of the family portrays the typical Nigerian patriarchal system whereby a man's decision goes unchallenged. Achebe presents the egoistic and boastful nature of man where physical and psychological abuse of a woman is seen as a normal phenomenon. Although, creative writings have moved beyond this, Achebe's creative imagination is seen by Acholonu (1994: 40) as an act of women brutalisation that is due to illiteracy, rusticism and morbid traditionalism. The rejection of these female stereotypes is presented in the works of Mabel Segun, Zainab Alkali, Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, Julie Okoh, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Sefi Atta, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, Osita Ezenwanebe, Stella Dia Oyedepo and others. These women writers write in order to pave ways for the alternative creation of women status whereby they can make immense positive

contributions on issues such as marriage, childbirth, motherhood, and emotional psyches. Solberg (1983: 247) observes that one of the ways of correcting one's faulty image of the African woman would be through the African women seen from the "inside", in other words, rendered by women. Also, Showalter (1986: 14) sees that female writing has its own unique character whether because it draws on female body images, uses a 'woman' language, expresses the female psyche or reflects women's cultural position. Solberg and Showalter's views are seen from the literary perspectives whereby female writers should endeavour to recreate their positions in the society through literary values. It is true that when a woman writer writes from a woman's perspective about women's issues, the flavour and aesthetics embedded in such work is different from writing outside the female body since she is writing from experiences, inner self and perspectives. The women in this category reject what Stubbs (1981: xiii) observes and embraces that:

- a. No matter what part in society individual women in fact play, traditional images focus on their domestic and sexual roles. This has the effect continually limiting women's notion of themselves and their possibilities. It undermines from within... the women's movement knows this, and so attempts to combat cultural stereotypes of female experience...
- b. These are confronted and hopefully discredited by the creation of new alternative images which instead of narrowing women's consciousness of themselves, try to expand it.

Stubbs' observation reflects the present situation among Nigerian female writers who are also products of same experiences. Most Nigerian female writers such as Zulu Sofola, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Julie Okoh, Tess Onwueme, and Osita Ezenwanebe are embracing the redefinition and re-appraisal of women in the society by creating females who act outside the domesticated and cultural roles expected of them. The writers create these roles in order to have alternative status like working class woman, strong willed, assertive and agile women while they destroy the old ones that see them as witches, harlots, fragile, and full house wife. These women are referred to by Afolabi (2002: 127) as "Womb-Men"; women who are ready to assert themselves and prove to men that they are capable of doing what they do. While women in this category take into cognisance that the physiognomic creations of both sexes are different by nature's design, they still see themselves as competitors in humanity. Such is the situation in Stella Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of the Bumpy Chested* whereby the female characters in the play takes another dimension to fight for their freedom in a patriarchal society. Affirmative women are seen as models of self-determination, self-assertion and self-actualisation.

Oyedepo's female characters are what Ojediran (2012: 253) describes as women with aesthetics in assertiveness who view strong will as a form of help, the formation of a strong self which allows them to explore the opportunities of disagreeing with certain socio-cultural, historical and religious beliefs that limit and destroy their capabilities. However, writers who present female characters in this category see a woman as a whole being and not a fragmented part in their portrayal because they are either able to confront their situations or avoid the situations, as in

Irene Salami-Agunloye's *More than Dancing* where women's consciousness and active participation are required to take their place in politics and social mainstream.

Also, in *The Queen's Sister*, Ubi's character is presented as a womanist stereotype who defies all instructions at the king's palace that her co-wives see her as the odd one amongst them. Women in this category help themselves to freedom as portrayed in Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Out of the Mask* where the women carry out their threats to the bewilderment of the men. Ifeoma is given the voice in the play to challenge the male characters who take advantage of the masquerades to molest women. In the engaging dialogue, it shows that women are becoming self-confident to see some archaic traditions as obsolete, worthy of abrogation by the society.

IFEOMA: You won't do anything. If you think that this year is like other years that you molested us and went free, then try it and see. Go and tell the other boys. If any masquerade flogs me tomorrow, I will set fire on that masquerade.

IZUNNA: Chai Abomination! Look at these female-things talking abomination about masquerade. The cabinet must hear this. It is taboo and you must suffer the punishment.

IFEOMA: Who cares about your useless taboo. You can't scare us. If you try any nonsense tomorrow, we will do something that will shock everybody who hears it.

OKEY: I am not surprised that you are making mouth. That is what women are good at (pp. 93-94).

Utoh-Ezeajugh uses the characterization of these four girls to challenge the culture that has marginalized and subordinated them for years. To the uttermost surprise of the boys and even to the readers, the playwright makes the girls wear mask which sends a message of confrontation to anyone. One cannot call this swapping of roles; rather it is seen as being assertive to make the necessary change needed within the patriarchal society. Just like we see in Julie Okoh's *Edewede* where the major character, Edewede, instigates her fellow women against the men, Utoh-Ezeajugh also brings out the character of Chisolum as a womanist character who is ready to fight the men to a standstill. This mirrors Alice Walker's view as a way of rescuing the marginalised woman from the negative and inaccurate stereotypes that masks her in the feminist discourse. Her definitions of womanism in the book *In Search of Our Mother's Garden's: Womanist Prose* (1983) sees that womanism is:

The black folk expression of mothers to female children, you are acting womanish, i.e. like a woman... usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or wilful behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one... (A womanist is also) a woman who loves other women sexually and / or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture... and women's strength... committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist..." (pp.xi-xii).

Chisolum and Edewede express the womanish aesthetics whereby a young girl wants to know more than it is expected of

her. The fearlessness and courage needed by women in general is seen in these two characters who does not see anything wrong in taking their fights to the people in question. While Chisolum agrees to be punished for the sins of the other girls, Edewede takes on the sex strike with other women of her age to stop the maltreatment from men. This shows that women are engaging themselves in their freedom if the society does not. This corroborates Salami's (2005: 423) view that:

Globally women have been known to use collective action to put pressure on the authorities in order to liberate themselves from on form of oppression or another. In Nigeria, examples of female collective actions against male intrusion into female spaces are known to have taken place.

Collective action is an act of sisterhood which allows women to be their sister's keeper. Such collective action is seen in Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*; Irene Salami-Agunloye's *Sweet Revenge*, and *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin*; and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*. Sisterhood helps women assert their identification with one another and claim a collective strength to fight against patriarchal culture. This view is embodied in the slogan that "sisterhood is powerful", coined by Kathie Sarachid in 1968 and popularised in Robin Morgan's book *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970). Although this phrase is common in the writings of so-called "radical feminists", the focus of their writing is arguably the rage of women against men. This is still common in women's writings who see their female characters as subsumed in externally imposed societal laws that negate both their personal and collective images.

Docile / Dependent Woman

This category of women refuses to see their worth as women, and care less about what they go through in the patriarchal system. They see the inferiorized and second-class position and the status quo in the society as what should continue particularly for women who have been in such system for a long time. The docile and dependent women dogmatically follow laid down tradition which they see as a way of life. Such women want stereotyped cultures of subjugation that continue to make them subordinates, dependent and passive. They are depicted in most literary works as good cooks, home cleaners, gossips, care givers. They are full of complexes that makes the woman socially irrelevant. The women are powerless as they are overwhelmed by domestic responsibilities and imposition of rules and responsibilities by men. They are usually discarded through a continuous social process that has limited them from girlhood. The character of Bharo in Julie Okoh's *The Mannequins* falls into this category of women who want to always be at the mercy of men, depend on them and be at the beck and call of men. Although they can be in the position of liberating themselves, they are not ready to change. Bharo, an uneducated fashionista is depicted as a woman with a mindset of accepting her stereotyped domestic role in the society. She is voiceless from the beginning of the play, accepts Mr. Adudu's sexual advances, believes in polygamy and respects the husband's rights irrespective of what she wants or deserves as a woman. This is a play where Okoh presents the men as people who acquire women as properties. Bharo's inability to tell her colleagues the source of her expensive travelling and extravagant lifestyle irritates Ekata who expresses his mind that:

EKATA: I pity you. You are all body but no soul. Just like the mannequins in the supermarket. They

look so attractive you think they are human beings. But have a close look at them, they are nothing but dead bodies (34).

Okoh's view of female voicelessness is summarised by Ekata who sees a woman with Bharo's attributes to be a decorated mannequin in the supermarket because she will forever remain silent and weighted down under an endless array of accessories.

Further, taking a clue from Irene Salami's *The Queen Sisters*, a play based on history, women are seen as mere acquisition of properties whereby a man's wealth is showcased and valued. Ubi, the heroine in the play is forcefully married to the King. Out of disgust, she rebels including against the co-wives. Salami-Agunloye presents this play in a new form required of women writers to change their stories in history and at present. Historically, Ubi is said to be a wicked woman who committed so many abominable acts and wicked deeds, but *The Queen Sisters* provides an alternative way of viewing women in history. This play showcases another form of stereotype through history that sees years of women's subordination and marginalisation. Azuike (2011: 47) asks vital questions that make the play a success such as:

...from what does Ubi plan to liberate the Benin women? Is it from the shackles of ignorance and superstition, which the women of the harem have, for years, willingly accepted? Could she be on a conscientization mission to challenge the "phallic dominance" of her society? How far will she succeed, indeed, to change the psyche of a society which has adhered strictly to a series of stereotypical views that have resulted in the general devaluation of women?

While Ubi's behaviour generated lots of controversies, anger and agitation as seen in Benin kingdom, the oppressive nature of the society is brought to lime light whereby women can read and be determined to change their stories from the docile and passive woman to the vocal and active person. Reading through the lines of Iyase and Osuma, one sees the position man expect woman to be up till now:

IYASE: Our mothers were very well behaved. They submitted easily to our fathers. They never initiated any discussion and never joined in any unless they were asked to.

OSUMA: They were hardly ever seen or heard in public affairs (p. 9)

Iyase and Osuma's comments are quite true in the past. This is visible in some traditional Nigerian societies where women are rarely admitted into the elder's councils except when she is to be reprimanded for any offence, or when she has become an elderly woman that they feel can keep secrets, a stage is referred to as "masculinity" in some cultures. To the men, this is a stage when she has evolved to the level where she can contribute useful ideas in the society. Disgracefully, issues that concerns women are also presided over by men without considering how women feel or what they can do. Okoh (2003: 165) opines that:

As society developed, gender discriminations are institutionalised and reinforced by traditions and religious dogma, until they become part of our cultural heritage; hence, in every patriarchal society, women are placed under the tutelage of men, first, of her father, then of her husband and is never viewed as an entity in her own capacity.

It is observed that culture plays an important role in the domestication of women and their perspective about life. Culture established the inequalities between the sexes. This gives the male gender greater and respected values in the world than the female ones. Taking a critical look at the cultural traditions that back a woman up in the Nigerian society, one sees that such traditions are coercive, oppressive, enslaving, imperialistic, dehumanising, subjugating, demonic and traumatic. In Salami-Agunloye's *The Queen Sisters*, Ubi observes that the oppression and dehumanisation of one is the same as that of many. Just like Sofola's Ogwoma, in *Wedlock of the Gods*, the feminist / womanist tendency is brought to an abrupt end whereby these female characters are unable to fulfil their struggles to freedom. Ogwoma dies and the struggle for self-assertiveness dies with her. Similarly, Ubi's banishment from the kingdom puts an end to female emancipation. While these two female characters have the capacities to change their immediate society, the struggles lead to their downfalls which take the readers back to culture. The two plays reveal that if socio-cultural values are not obeyed, the end is always disastrous.

At the expense of women's selfhood, they are to obey societal obligations that make them feel inferior to their male counterparts. However, through different writings, female creativities have helped to make women see their self-worth and the world in general sees the value of womanhood. While female creativity redresses the textual inferiority placed on women by making them the subjects rather than the objects, central eponymous character and to be the subject matter of discourse, unknowingly, some writers do not see it that way. They still view women from the 19th century perspectives whereby they are

domesticated and husband lovers irrespective of the inhuman nature hurled on them.

Conclusion

Women writers are historians, recorders, teachers, projectors, preachers and interpreters of the same patriarchal societies that are often limiting their potentials. While these writers are not only seen as people who can change their situations within the public sphere, they are also self-examining the patriarchal societal values. However, some of the analysed Nigerian playwrights expose the male characters as selfish individuals who are rarely interested in the female's growth (educationally, physically, psychologically, economically and bodily), most of the female characters involved seem to be the harbinger of their own marginalisation.

Ironically, this is what is happening in Nigeria as women are agents perpetrating the removal of their own freedom. Nevertheless, women writers need to write more, showcase females' prowess and agility that they are ready to take up responsibilities in the public sphere. As such, women's lives should not be restricted to the domestic sphere which makes them voiceless, fragile, dependant, unassertive, redundant and useless. The negative images and status in their writings need to change as this will help send a message to the public that women are making their worth known instead of making their heroines die with their feminist / womanist struggles. Elevating the inner psyche and consciousness of female characters is very important as this will help in creating distinctively feminine nature and remove the inferiority complex of these characters.

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