20

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURAL DISCOURSE

Isaiah Bariki
Domwini D. Kuupole
Taofiq A. Alabi

CONTENTS

Syllable Structure and Hiatus Resolution in Ọ̀kpámerì Language 1
Kamar Adewale Rafiu & Gbolahan Samson Oyinloye

English Speech Variation among Students of Kwara State University, Malete 14
Taofiq Adedayo Alabi & Mariam Titilope Gobir

The Word and the Wordsmith: The Morphology of Olu Obafemi's *Naira Has No gender* 30
Mahfouz A. Adedimeji

Lexico-Semantic Foregrounding in Obituary Announcements in Selected Nigerian Newspapers 45
George Abiodun Olaleye

An Analysis of Interpersonal Metafunction in Donald Trump's Inaugural Speech 61
Taofiq Adedayo Alabi & Mary Titilayo Olowe

Code-Mixing and Code-Switching among Yoruba-English Speaking Secondary School Students in Ibadan, Nigeria 76
Stephen Billy Olajide; Issa Sanusi & Adewole Oluwaseun Alolade

The Postcolonial Analysis of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* 91
Kadir Ayinde Abdullahi

Gender Projections in Akan Highlife Dirges 103
Moussa Traoré & Ernestina Asiamah

A Feminist Critique of Toyin Abiodun's *The Marriage of Arike* 111
Foluke Aliyu-Ibrahim

An Examination of Moral Decadence in Contemporary African Society in Some Selected Plays of Toni Duruaku 121
Tayo Simeon Arinde & Ferdinand Ogbonna Ossi

Anti-Oppressive Oppression: The Subaltern Writes 131
Abdul-Karim Kamara

African Cultures and Traditions in EFL Classes: Lessons from Trends in Benin Republic of Benin
Juvenale Agbayahoun & Dossou F. Lanmantchion 145

The Rhetoric of Religion and Money in Nigerian Politics: A Case of Kwara State
Akiti Glory Alamu 152

Analysis of Evaluation and Feedback Strategies in Reading Comprehension Lessons among Secondary School Teachers in Nigeria
F. Oyeyemi Adeniyi 161

Fostering Innovations in the Use of Technologies to Motivate EFL Listeners and Speakers: Case Study of Adjarra Secondary Schools in Ouémé, a Region Of Benin Republic
Evariste Assogba Kottin 173

Reconstructing Contemporary African Art Narratives through Found Objects: A Personal Testimony
Moses Bariki 186

Peace Education and Contested Narratives in Nigerian Societies: Flying Flags or Raising Standards?
Kayode Odujobi 196

Contemporary Language of Giving in the Nigerian Church
Oyetade M. O. 208

9

A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF TOYIN ABIODUN'S *THE MARRIAGE OF ARIKE*

Foluke Aliyu-Ibrahim
Department of English,
University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.
folukealiyu.ai@unilorin.edu.ng

Introduction

Women-centred issues and the representation of women in literature are some of the concerns of Feminist criticisms of literary texts including those by Africans. Before the entry of the Nigerian woman into the literary space, male writing had institutionalized a body of literature which promotes a phallic culture and aesthetics. Examples of such texts include Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *A Man of the People* (1966); Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1970) and *Season of Anomy* (1973); and Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1961). Images of the African women were either that of the seductress, "Good Time Girl" or the Mother figure.

Male literary artists of the second generation (i.e. those who began writing from 1980) such as Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi and Bode Sowande created more politically conscious female characters. It may be argued however, that as Marxists, the focus of these writings are political; thus issues that concerned the woman and her role as a woman are not emphasized. Could this be because these writers are all men as claimed by Olaniyan and Quayson (2007, p. 511)? They assert thus:

> It is clear that male writers and critics think of the oppressed in quite different ways than women think of them; the variegated and often discrepant oppressions that are manifest on the continent are assimilated by male critics to a particular order of urgency.

This could be true of Nigerian writers especially if one recalls that most Nigerian female writers from the first generation (such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta) through the second (such as Tess Onwueme and Zainab Alkali) to the third generation (such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Sefi Atta) have focused more on women issues than their male counterparts have done. Note however that as observed by Aliyu (2013), some differences exist among these generations of Nigerian writers.

This is not to deny that male writers do not write about issues that primarily affect women. The attention that has been focused on women globally which climaxed to The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 has ensured that women-centred issues such as rape, discrimination based on gender, and, in

general, the violation of the rights of the woman are foremost in most discourse; creative writing whether produced by men or women has not been unaffected by this. Thus in this chapter, we intend to analyse the issue(s) discussed in the play text by Toyin Abiodun titled *The Marriage of Arike* (2010) and set this or these against his presentation of his female characters. This is with the view to ascertaining whether Abiodun's portrayal of women helps to recreate reality or reflects it. One of literary feminism's agenda is the re-invention of texts and criticism to create a body of literature which appeals to the female reader. Although *The Marriage of Arike* (2010) was written by a man, it treats social issues that affect the woman primarily.

Literature Review

As a member of the first generation of Nigerian writers, Flora Nwapa (2007) indicates that the unsatisfactory discussion of women issues and of the portrayal of women by her male counterparts prompted her to begin writing. Works of first generation of Nigerian writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi and T.M. Aluko are replete with such portrayals of women as docile, voiceless and powerless in the face of a historical change such as colonialism (e.g. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, 1958); even after colonial rule either as vain women interested only in frivolities (e.g. Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel,*1962) seductress (e.g. Soyinka's *The Interpreters,* 1970 and Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana,* 1961) or at best as wives or girlfriends working to provide support services in professions like nursing and secretaries (e.g. Achebe's *A Man of the People* , 1966). Yet, there were women and events inspired by women in the real world who could have provided models for better portrayals. These include the various groupings of women done under different categorisations - either as daughters, wives, market women or trade groups which are tools of power used by women to obtain and entrench power in the traditional and modern Nigerian societies (Acholonu, 1995, pp 6, 26-29; Kolawole, 1997, p. 22; McIntosh, 2009, p. 226); historical and legendary female figures like Queen Amina of Zazzau, Efunsetan Aniwura, and Moremi; political activists like Mrs Ransome Kuti and Mrs Margaret Ekpo, and significant events such as the Aba Women's War of 1949.

The first generation of male writers also failed to write about themes that were of primary concern to the woman. The arrival into the creative writing space of female writers like Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta with works like *Efuru* (1966) and *Joys of Motherhood* (1979) forced social issues like bareness and polygamy into national and international discourses. Citing the writings of El Akkad, Tewfik El Hakim, Taha Hussein, Naguib Mahfouz and El Sahar on the portrayal of women in Arab literature, El Saadawi (2007, p. 520) arrives at a similar conclusion and laments thus:

> ... not one has been able to free himself from this age-old image of women handed down to us from an ancient past , no matter how famous many of them have been for their passionate defence or human rights,

human values and justice, and their rigorous resistance to oppression and tyranny in any form.

With the second generation of male Nigerian writers, one observes a shift to a more positive representation of the woman. An interesting one is evidenced in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988). Nwapa (2007, p. 527) attributes this to "recent changes in Nigeria – the 1967-70 Civil War, economic changes, and an emphasis on the education of women which have affected men's views about women". To Aliyu (2013), this shift could be a response to the charge made against the first generation as the second generation of Nigerian writers were seeking relevance and recognition in the Nigerian creative and critical spaces. Consequently, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi and Bode Sowande, etc make women more active subjects in their works. In a few of these writings the female characters are even the prime movers of the social change being sought in the texts. Two of such are Osofisan's *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest* (1992) and Obafemi's *Naira has no Gender* (1993). However these writings are few and far-in-between. For the majority of the male writings of the second generation of Nigerian literature, female characters are, at best, presented as active supporters of the initiators (who are always men) of social change. So, while the images of women of the second generation of Nigerian writers were more positive and realistic, their themes were still not women-centred. Majority of them were Marxists in orientation and this was responsible for their concentration on socio-political issues.

This is one of the distinctions between the writings of male artists of the second generation and those of the succeeding ones who began writing from the 1990s and 2000s as this group of writers (such as Helon Habila, Toni Kan, Chris Abani, Sunny Ododo, Ben Binebai, Osita Ezenwanebe and Toyin Abiodun) does not exhibit any sympathy for leftist ideologies such as Marxism, Socialism, Communism, etc. However, the themes of the third generation of Nigerian writers are no less socio-political as the socio-economic implications of neo-colonialism in the real world serve as ready-made materials for creative writings. Other thematic preoccupations include gender, religion, terrorism, magical realism, etc. This is how far any general statement about the third generation of Nigerian writers can be made. It would be a difficult, if not an impossible, task to attempt any generalisation about the third generation of Nigerian writers. The fact of the large number of writers in the group and their prolificacy are factors that are responsible for this. It goes to follow therefore that female representations in this group of writers would be diverse. Thus, the study of Toyin Abiodun's play text, *The Marriage of Arike* (2010), becomes germane.

Any research on women or gender generally is worth the while. While reflecting society, literature also helps to create or shape reality. Although feminist literary criticism analyses fictive texts, a link to the material world is established as

the study could play a part (no matter how little) in the fight against the oppression of women and indeed, men. Warhol and Herndl (1991) attest to this relationship thus:

> Feminist critics generally agree that the oppression of women is a fact of life, that gender leaves its traces in literary texts and on literary history, and that feminist literary criticism plays a worthwhile part in the struggle to end oppression in the world outside of texts...its overtly political nature is perhaps the single most distinguishing feature of feminist scholarly work. (p. x)

This underscores the importance of any study of literary texts whose issues are women-centered or that on the perception of women in literature created by both men and women.

Methodology

The method adopted for the study is qualitative. Toyin Abiodun"s *The Marriage of Arike* (2010) will serve as primary text of analysis. The study will also rely on library research, both print and electronic as secondary sources. The approach is sociological with Feminism being the chosen theory. Some of the principles behind feminism include an analysis of the female issues and the portrayal of women in literature. The research would be descriptive and analytical.

There are several regional feminist theories informed by the differences in the perception of the woman and her role in the society. Consequently, in Africa, several theories have evolved which capture Africa's experiences and perception of the woman and her role in the society. These include Filomena Steady's African Feminism, Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's African Womanism, Catherine Acholonu's Motherism, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism, Mary Ebun Kolawole's Womanism, and Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-feminism. Aliyu (2013) identifies certain features of these theories which make them inappropriate for use in analyzing African texts. Aliyu-Ibrahim (2018) thus proposes Afro-Feminism as an alternative to the theories mentioned above.

The features of Afro-Feminism relevant for this study are:

1) Afro-Feminism is derived from African culture; therefore culture determines the perspective from which thematic and aesthetic qualities in texts are considered. Texts are contextualised in specific African cultures for analysis.

2) Afro-Feminism entails the assessment or explication of feminist themes in texts from the viewpoint of African concepts of feminism and gender. Therefore, analyses focus attention on both male and female characters. This results from the principle of Afro-Feminism present the relationship between the genders as complementary and which also include the male in its feminism. The men are not regarded as the enemy; it is the structures in the society that need to be changed. One implication of this is the fact that women can be instigators, beneficiaries or victims,

just as men can, of an oppressive system. Another implication is that it allows for the feminist critique of texts written by men.

Textual Analysis of Toyin Abiodun's *The Marriage of Arike*

Thematic Preoccupation: *The Marriage of Arike* (2010: all subsequent references in page numbers only are to this edition) focuses on one of the challenges that beset the girl-child in the Nigerian society i.e. early or forced marriage. Salami, the father, is presented as having selfish reasons for wanting Arike, his daughter, to get married immediately after her first menstruation as is the practice in the world of the text. He gives her out to the "highest bidder", Alhaji. This truncates her education and eventually leads to Arike's early death from complications of pregnancy.

Abiodun, in this play text, condemns the practice of early and forced marriages. This is evident in the fact that the play ends in the tragic death of Arike and in the insanity of Bisi, her mother. Furthermore, Arike's friend, Helen, whose parents allow her to continue with her education, serves as some sort of alternative (albeit not well developed) to the success that awaits the girl who is educated. Helen becomes a doctor to whom Arike is assigned when she is taken to hospital.

Abiodun's *The Marriage of Arike* reminds of another play text, i.e. *Anowa* (1970) by Ama Ata Aidoo, that deals with a similar subject matter. *Anowa* ends tragically for the heroine, just like in Abiodun's play. However, while Anowa defies her family by marrying the man of her choice, Arike lacks courage and does as her father says. *Anowa* (1970) is a written adaptation of the folktale concerning the girl who regrets her defiance of her parents' choice of a husband for her. If we consider Abiodun's *The Marriage of Arike* (2010) as being inspired by this folktale, then to some extent, this could be a similarity that the play text shares with Aidoo's *Anowa*. It would then be correct to analyse *The Marriage of Arike* (2010) as a text that upturns this folktale. Thus in making Arike to die from the consequence of obeying her father, Abiodun subverts that folktale. But how successful has the playwright been in presenting his message? The next step in the analysis of the play text is an examination of the major male and female characters whose roles are significant to the story.

Male Characters: Salami as the father of Arike and husband to Bisi is an irresponsible man who successfully disregards the wishes of his wife and daughter by marrying his daughter out to the man who offers him the highest sums of money. Salami is a lazy man (p. 19), a drunk and a profligate spender (p. 13) who refuses to pay his rent (p. 9) and also dupes his brother of their inheritance (p. 19).

Ajetunmobi, Salami's brother, is perceived as a selfish man who is interested in getting his share of money for the sale of their father's farm from Salami. He is selfish because he refuses to help Bisi to appeal to Salami not to cut-short Arike's education by an early marriage. This is in spite of the fact that his three daughters are undergraduates. He is more concerned with the money he is being owed by Salami (p. 21) and does not mind collecting from the money Salami collects from Alhaji to pay

his (Ajetunmobi) daughters' school registration fees (p. 44). As an elder in the family (p. 44), he therefore fails in his duty.

Alhaji and the other suitors – Farmer, Ndubuisi, Osaze and Army General – are presented as men who poach on little girls to their own advantage. Alhaji who succeeds in marrying Arike reneges on his promise to allow her to continue her education (p.49). Indeed he marries girls only to turn them and their children into workers on his farm (p. 47). In spite of using them as cheap labour, he is reluctant to spend on them when the need arises. Thus, by the time Arike is taken to the hospital, her case becomes too late for medical intervention (pp. 50 & 56).

The only male character who is portrayed with some redeeming features in this drama is Dafe, Helen's brother and Arike's boyfriend. Unfortunately, his character is not developed enough to play any significant role in the plot.

Female Characters: Bisi is portrayed as a woman who readily accedes to her husband's threats even when she could have devised other strategies to get her way. She seems to have no mind of her own in spite of the fact that she wishes Arike to continue her schooling. She gives in quickly to Arike's suggestion that they inform Salami of the truth that Arike has begun menstruating earlier before:

ARIKE: [*pulls BISI* aside] Maami! [conspiratorially] Maybe we should tell him
o. We have nowhere to go.

BISI: [submits] Okay. (p. 5).

Bisi's attempts at resisting her husband are weak and ineffectual. For someone who has been married to Salami for so long, she readily believes his promise of Arike continuing her school (pp. 14 and 21). Indeed, she is more interested in Arike's schooling that she fails to see the connection between early marriage and the possibility of a truncation of formal education. Salami forcefully seizes her money from her wrapper, gives her a part of it to buy kolanut for him after promising to give her back her money on her return with the kolanut. She returns and waits in vain for Salami to return the money and then meekly falls for his tactic which is a diversionary anger (pp. 23-28). Furthermore, she is portrayed as failing in her duty as a mother.

The concept of "mother" in the Nigerian (African) society is one in which the mother is always ready to lose her life to protect her child. Yet when Mama Helen presents Bisi with the alternative of leaving Salami so that Arike would be spared the trauma of early marriage, and even after being given some amount of money by Dafe (Helen's brother) to facilitate this, she remains with Salami (pp. 33-34). Bisi is even present when Salami eventually marries Arike off to Alhaji (pp. 37-41). The result is the death of her daughter and her own insanity. In the analyses of Abimbola Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* (Aliyu-Ibrahim, 2012) and

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus,* (Aliyu, 2013) it was established that leaving a husband is one of the avenues that women in the Nigerian

(African) cultures have always exploited as an alternative to an unsatisfactory marriage. It is not dependent on the availability of money. In Bisi's case, she receives money for this from Dafe. Is the fact that she does not play the role expected of a mother responsible for why she loses her sanity when her daughter dies? If so, then it also reminds one of Mama (Beatrice) in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus.*

Aliyu (2013) argues that Beatrice's action of poisoning her husband is neither admirable nor heroic. This is because she had been encouraged by Aunty Ifeoma to leave Eugene and the killing of one's spouse is not an alternative in the Nigerian (African) culture. Hence, Mama's action is not recognized as no one believes her when she admits to killing her husband and eventually, she loses her mind even if temporarily because she lets her son to take the blame for her action.

Arike, the heroine is portrayed, like her mother, as a meek sheep, ready to give herself up to slaughter. She encourages her mother to disclose the fact of her menstruation (p. 5) with the excuse that: "We have nowhere to go" (p.5). When Salami tells her to dress more beautifully for her suitors, she accedes without question (p. 22); yet this is someone who professes to love Dafe and has even made plans for a future with him (p. 18). Arike sits meekly during the negotiations for her hand in marriage by the suitors. She even asks her father to treat one of the suitors civilly when she cries; "But, Baami, you could have at least been diplomatic with the man" (p. 27). As Narrator of her story, we expect Arike to play a more active role; however, shortly after appearing on stage to address the audience the second time, she is taken ill and dies.

The only form of resistance Arike puts up in the play text is on the night of her marriage to Alhaji when she prevents him from sleeping with her (p. 47) and even this is ineffectual as Alhaji rapes her when she attempts to return home (p. 48). The rape becomes a constant thing until Arike gives in to Alhaji. According to her: "My confidence in myself and my self-worth became so battered that I found myself yielding to him with little or no resistance" (p.49). Since an alternative (leaving the marriage) has been proffered earlier by Mama Helen to Bisi as solution, one wonders why Arike and indeed the other wives of Alhaji do not simply run away. It may be argued that Dogo and the other henchmen of Alhaji's would prevent such an attempt. But surely, there is no arguing the fact that Arike and the other wives are portrayed as women who accepted their fates without resistance.

Mama Helen and Helen, Arike's friend, would have served as foils to Arike and Bisi or as images of powerful women. Unfortunately, they are not developed enough for this purpose to be achieved. Mama Helen is the one who advises Bisi to leave Salami while the only significant role Helen plays is as Arike's doctor who later relates Arike's death and the cause to her family.

Discussion of Findings

Abiodun's play text is preoccupied with a woman-centred issue – early marriage and its consequences. His portrayal of male characters, who are the prime agents of this evil, therefore, may be appropriate to some extent; they are shown as having financial and other material benefits from such a practice. However, he introduces a male character, Dafe, who is used to offering money to Bisi to facilitate her leaving Salami. Dafe is also a young man who is in love with Arike. The playwright thus has the opportunity of making Dafe play a more significant and more positive role than the other male characters. However, Dafe's characterisation is not developed beyond this.

The female characters, namely Bisi and Arike are portrayed as meek and helpless in the face of an irresponsible father who more or less "sells" his daughter out in marriage and in the face of the threats to life and their ambition of an education for Arike. Since the story is an issue which affects the woman or girl child, one would have expected a more powerful and active portrayal of women, especially of the heroine. In a study on Julie Okoh's *Edewede,* Aliyu Ibrahim (2015) argues that Okoh's heroine, Edewede, debunks the myth of the voicelessness and helplessness of African women and rather than confrontation which could lead to tragedy, Edewede settles for constructive and progressive negotiation and ends up marrying the man of her choice. A more positive portrayal of women in *The Marriage of Arike* would have succeeded in giving alternatives to women who may find themselves in similar situations. It cannot be denied that this issue is not topical or that there is no connection between fiction and reality. In an introduction to the play text, Dr. Henry Hunjo affirms thus:

> As if he knew that one day Nigerians would be drawn into a debate on whether or not the girl-child should be given away in marriage before attaining the age of contractual capacity and nuptial consent, Toyin Abiodun writes *The Marriage of Arike* to query any marriage of the girl-child. The performance of the story on stage asks several questions that need answering...therefore, her (Arike"s) plight is the plight of all of us, Toyin Abiodun seems to say (pp. ii-iii).

An alternative of taking her daughter with her and leaving her husband instead of succumbing to her daughter's early marriage is offered Bisi but she is shown as not taking this advice with no reason advanced for this inaction. The portrayal of Bisi and Arike seems to suggest some subconscious but active role in the perpetration of the evil that early marriage is. Yet, both are shown in the play to be against it! One then wonders why they are not given a more active role.

The answer to this seems to be suggested at first glance by the classification of the drama. But a closer look at this, brings more questions than answers. The blurb defines the work as "undefined...one is tempted to tag the work a tragicomedy, the temptation exists still to affix the stamp of *comitragedy*, satire or absurd drama to it".

[illegible] Ekwuazi writes that "some dramas ...insist that we willingly suspend our disbelief – that we must perceive the action as a slice of life. Other types of drama, on the other hand, insist on our disbelief! *The Marriage of Arike* belongs to this latter group" (p. i). This tends to take away much from the text and the messages inherent in it. The action from the beginning to just before the end of the play seems to suggest that it is a caricature, an absurd drama where we suspend belief. However, the death of Arike and her mother's insanity prove to be too real and too tragic for the suspension of belief to last long. The reverse holds true if one were to describe it as a tragicomedy or comitragedy or if we were to suspend disbelief. The caricatural nature of the actions and of the characters make it a difficult task to suspend disbelief.

Conclusion

Literature reflects society. It also has the power to recreate society. The analysis done in this chapter has shown that while Abiodun's play text reflects society in his thematic preoccupation, his portrayal of his male and female characters falls short of recreating society by not providing alternatives in his play which could have been done through the development of some male and female characters and through the strengthening of the major female characters. Feminism began as a political movement and even in scholarship, it has not lost this feature.

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