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## Chapter Fourteen

### Vocality, Voicelessness and the Woman's Identity in Kanchana Ugbabe's Soulmates

*Foluke R. Aliyu-Ibrahim*

#### Introduction

Simpson's anthology, *The Book of Exiles* (1995), provides an insight into the various reasons people leave their countries and the different types of experiences each individual undergoes in another country. For instance, if in *Treasure Island*, the sojourn of the author, Robert Louis Stevenson, to Samoa suggests that his voluntary exile was pleasurable, however, one of the consequences of migration to another country, whether it is voluntary or not, is the conflict that occurs between the immigrant's identity of him/herself in relation to other people in the 'adopted' society and what the culture of the new place makes of that individual. Saha (2009), whose article attempts to prove that there is an exilic state in all dislocated lives, asserts that "displacement, whether forced or self-imposed, is in many ways a calamity" (p. 187).

One of the implications of this is to support a broadening of the definition of Simpson's (1995) anthology of 'exile' through the documentation of the experiences of different people across history and from different parts of the world. The examples here would include the narratives of Henry James, Ernest



Hemingway, Robert Louis Stevenson and Ayatollah Khomeini. Thus, this chapter shall consider as exiles women who are married to men from different countries other than their own and who are living in their husbands' home countries. This does not, however, mean that issues of identity cannot bedevil the man or woman who resides in his or her own country; nonetheless, that is not the focus here.

### Theoretical Framework

The Nigerian feminist critic, Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), appears to have set the agenda for women writers when she urges the woman writer to be committed to correcting the misconceptions of the woman in male-authored texts, by presenting a woman's point of view in her writings. She echoes earlier critics, such as Olaniyan and Quayson, who in their anthology of critical essays, *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (2007), insist that for the African writer, there is an "intersection of adversarial contexts and the flowering of the creative muse." (p. 139). Consequently, the nine essays in the section, titled 'Creativity in/and Adversarial Contexts' (pp 140-191), reflect this bias. The different contributors, some of whom are also writers, had on different fora earlier on asserted that the African literary artist must be committed to seeking answers to the many socio-economic and political problems facing his continent. This attests to the link between literature and the society, in tune with Harrington's assertions (2004) that art makes references to and comments about human activities in society.

### Identity, Feminism and Nigerian Literature

Feminism in Nigerian literature began from the need to correct the stereotyped images of the African woman in writings by men that had often depicted her either as a seductress/'Good time Girl' or the Mother figure. 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). Thus, from a modest attempt to correct these images, the writings of the Nigerian women have now grown to challenge some of the old 'myths' about the identity of the woman and explain her role in the society.

Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues that of her many identities, that of the woman as wife has the weakest power, adding that misconceptions of the African woman, particularly the rural woman, have led to the belief that she is voiceless. The critic posits that the concentration of the attention of past writing on the role of the woman as wife is responsible for this misconception, especially as marriage is a major site of women's subjugation in the African continent. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) further argues that the silence of the African women is a creation of the Western feminist texts, stating that such feminists "fail to look for their (African women's) voices where we may find them, in the sites and forms in which these voices are uttered." (p. 11) There are, therefore, avenues where women do speak out and take action: at times even their silence becomes a loud speech.

It is within the context of the arguments that this paper, specifically examines Kanchana Ugbabe's *Soulmates* (2011), with a view to ascertaining the presentation of the various identities of the woman (Indian and Nigerian), as she relates with other characters in the short stories that make up the collection.

### **Synopsis of *Soulmates***

*Soulmates* (2011) is a collection of thirteen short stories, nine of which are relevant to the present study as they tell of the challenges non-Nigerian women married to Nigerians often face. The collection of the short stories reminds one of Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965), a powerful statement on the identity conflicts and other challenges that are a natural result of such unions. The author, Ugbabe, is herself an Indian married



to an Idoma man from the Benue State of northern Nigeria and, thus, provides some understanding of the identity crises resulting from culture clash that challenge such women, who can be categorised as exiles who attempt to understand the cultures they find themselves in. For the analysis in this study, the major conflict has to do with the husbands' disposition to polyandry (or polygamy, as it is commonly referred to in the Nigerian culture). While some of the protagonists are able to adjust their identities to fit in, others find it difficult and remain alienated, not only from the culture itself, but from their husbands for whom they have paid the high price of exiling themselves from their own home cultures. A part of the blurb on the back cover of the book captures the situation:

Derived from the experiences of both an insider and an outsider, the intricate stories of *Soulmates* chart journeys of love, friendship, despair, daily negotiations and strategies for survival while exploring the physical and spiritual aspects of being transplanted to a foreign country, of living with fluid roots. (Back Cover)

### **Self-Identity of the Woman in *Soulmates***

Ugbabe presents two identities of the married woman in her collection of stories. The first is the woman who is silent in the face of challenges, while the second is vocal in her protestation of the travails she is confronted with. Interestingly, the non-Nigerian women married to Nigerians in the collection make up the first group. The second group consists of both non-Nigerian and Nigerian women.

### **Voicelessness as Identity**

The non-Nigerian woman in the world of *Soulmates* often arrives into her host country with a concept of marriage that is totally different from what she comes to meet in the husband's culture. The narrator of '*The White Rooster*' (pp 111-122), explains:



I was made to be part of a team, conditioned for marriage and for a life which venerated the husband. My Indian heritage kept my grandmother behind the steel almirah when she spoke to my grandfather. My mother had her marriage arranged for her at seventeen, and derived her life's satisfaction from watching my father eat his meals, and caring for his needs to the minutest detail. (p. 115)

At first reading, there seems to be a similarity between the Indian and Nigerian woman's identity as a wife; like her Indian counterpart, the Nigerian woman is expected to also obey and respect her husband. However, the meaning of the word 'team' in the quotation above contradicts the succeeding description of the actions of the Indian wife, who is described as being excessively servile. One then wonders what the role of the husband is if the man, who is expected to be a member of this team, has all his needs and desires catered for with diligence and veneration, but there is no hint of his own duties and responsibilities towards the wife.

The passage also describes more vividly the overall identity of the Indian wife in the stories in the collection, as could be observed in the Indian women's interactions with their husbands and the other characters. Indeed, Ugbabe portrays the Indian women in the related stories as being unable to exist without their men, such that they silently accept any disdainful acts from the husbands without complaints. In fact, the women are portrayed as being unable to live without their soulmates, as shall be explored in some of the stories in subsequent discussions below.

In 'Testimonies' (pp 17-24), for instance, the narrator belongs to a prayer-group made up of women who meet on Friday afternoons to exchange 'testimonies' about their lives in a devotional routine. These testimonies are supposed to imply change for the better, spiritually (p.18), an aspect of her life that makes her feel younger and more peaceful about life in general. She is however, struck by one of the women, Comfort,



who is an enigma to the narrator. Comfort always remains "calm and unperturbed" (p. 21) whenever she narrates her 'testimonies'. Yet, Comfort looks "perpetually doughty and pure, pastry pure, and totally incapable of being bad." (p. 19). Comfort has a seemingly happy life — a husband who is known as a philanthropic "Father Christmas" and a maid for each of her three children (p. 23). The narrator, therefore, wonders: "What was the 'sin' all about?" (p. 23). The narrator, thus, sneaks into Comfort's home and discovers Comfort's secret: her husband and children physically abusing one of the maids over "missing plastic buckets and teaspoons." (p. 23) She realises that all of Comfort's testimonies about the incidents that have befallen her, like robberies, have been mere lies. The narrator, who reveals this secret in her own testimony, however, remains silent about her secret discovery: "I remained silent as the group joined Comfort in a chorus of praise." (p. 24).

In 'Golden Opportunities' (pp 39-47), the narrator is presented as being quite naïve, when she is swindled by Kemi, the first wife of her husband's friend. The narrator of this story is at a point in her marriage where indifference has set in. She metaphorically puts it thus:

My friend Daphne says that the sharp bit goes out of a situation if you stick out long enough, and that you arrive at a sort of benign indifference where the boat doesn't rock too badly, even if you keep wishing at the back of your mind that you were in a different boat. (p. 39).

Kemi's arrival in the narrator's house after a visit to see her son in a boarding school, gives her, the narrator, a new insight into the circumstances of her marital life, which appears not to favour her, although she seems to be the one who finances the marriage. She and her husband "operated a joint account that was perpetually in the red" (p. 45), but whereas he fills his tank every time he passes a petrol station, she only "flogged the old Toyota on reserve and grudgingly drove in for maybe a quarter-tank of gas." Similarly, she observes that while the husband's car is in top condition all the time, hers is ever in need of repairs; and while his



car is always spotlessly clean, blaring out blues and jazz music as he cruises around, hers is consistently dirty and unwashed. (p. 45) However, her naïvety is such that she is still unable to even realise that her husband is, more or less, dependent on her financially and only exploits her for his own comfort. Worse, are the husband's incurable acts of infidelity (p. 46); yet, she could describe him to her friend meekly: "My husband was not a notoriously difficult man." (p. 45)

Her plan out of the situation is even more bizarre, as she describes to her friend how she intends to make money without his knowledge, in the hope that in the end, it would give her the power to control him. In fact, she explains that she has already managed to make some "meagre savings, put together erratically over a period of ten years", changing the hiding place constantly so that he does not find her out. She now pleads with Kemi to assist her to invest the money in her trading business, so that she could grow to be rich and, therefore, use the financial power to entrap the husband to herself fully. She is scared about the unconfirmed stories that Kemi tells her about her own polygamous marriage and writes off Debo (Kemi's husband) when she learns that he has two wives, wondering all the time why Debo should choose to have a second wife (Biola) who is mild-mannered, soft-spoken and shy, as against her friend, the glamorous and miniskirt-wearing Kemi (p. 40). She becomes too blinded by her hatred for the institution of polygamy to think critically as she finally brings out all her savings and naïvely hands them to Kemi, who eventually swindles her of it all.

In 'Jaded Appetites' (pp 51-62) the reader is presented with a narrator whose gushing love is not reciprocated by her husband:

It was our tenth wedding anniversary...My gold-fringed card on the table was gushing with sentiment. His was spare. Love for him was a benign presence like allowing the dog to lie in the kitchen and not kicking it. (pp 55-56)



The narrator then continues with the story of the love affair between a distant relative and her married lover, Armstrong, a veterinary surgeon. It is a love affair that is cyclical, as it could not possibly end in marriage. Initially, the narrator's relative believes her lover will leave his wife; however, when that fails to happen, she says she is not to get married at all (p. 57). However, she claims that she wants to get rid of Armstrong (p. 59) by Christmas, but by the new year, they are still together, although she also informs the narrator of a new boyfriend, Yinka, who has a fiancé whom he is tired of. The story ends with her curled up and resting her head on Armstrong's laps.

The story reveals that the narrator has a keen sense of observation as she realises quite early that Armstrong is merely taking advantage of her relative and would never abandon his wife for her: "I felt an intense irritation that he was a fake, phoney, a conman, a hyena in club-gear." (p. 56) Later, as she comes to understand more about him, the narrator's dislike for Armstrong increases, such that she begins to feel sorry for his wife and children (p. 58). In spite of these observations, she keeps silent and continues to watch her relative use her house to entertain him. This inaction recalls the insouciance of the silent watcher, the unnamed protagonist, in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are not Yet Born* (1968).

There is a similarity between the love (benign indifference) between the narrator and her husband on the one hand and the binding feelings between Armstrong and the narrator's distant relative on the other. This similarity is highlighted at the end of the story when the narrator becomes personally committed as to prepare Armstrong's lunch: "I made Armstrong a cheese sandwich and packed his supper in the food flasks." (p.61) A deeper interpretation of the incident would seem to indicate that the story of the distant relative is a metaphor for the narrator's own personal life with her husband.

Interestingly, while the reader is provided with the names of the two boyfriends (i.e. Armstrong and Yinka) of the narrator's distant relative, the relative herself is not named. Ugbabe, thus, denies the



relative any identity, but subsumes it under that of her men, as though to reflect the manner in which she allows the men to take control of her life.

In 'The White Rooster' (pp 111-121) the narrator tells of her suspicions about her husband falling in love with another woman, Agnes, when he goes on transfer to the south of Nigeria, leaving her behind at home. In comparing herself with Agnes, the narrator consciously searches for the reasons for the husband's infidelity, lamenting that, "she probably knew how to love more" (p. 121). It is worthy of note that while the reader knows the name of the 'other woman' (Agnes), the identity of the narrator herself is not revealed throughout the story, but is presented as another silent observer of events who bottles up her own resentments inside her strong heart. The reader would wonder why she does not take a more active role in winning back her husband, even when she contrasts the manner her other married friends accept the infidelity of their husbands against her own inability to do so from her husband.

Thus, rather than protest to him against the affair or have a show down over it all, she could only meekly confess: "With me, it was never a honeymoon when he drove in on Friday evenings. I bristled with resentment." (p. 117) This is further reflected in her other ineffectual reactions aimed at asserting her presence in her husband's life, which are limited to token actions of "...changing things around, putting his shirts on hangers, trying to leave her stamp where she (i.e. Agnes) had been." (p. 118). The narrator does nothing categorical about her suspicions of her husband's infidelity with Agnes, but chooses to "suffer within" (p. 118), creating a psychological diversion by wondering about the funeral rite of their white rooster, which "rose like a spectre in my mind." (p. 121)

### Vocality as Identity of the Woman in *Soulmates*

The voicelessness of the women in some of the stories in the collection is contrasted with the vocality of some of the women



facing the same challenges elsewhere. The narrator's attitude in 'The White Rooster' (pp 113-121), for instance, can be contrasted with Flora's in 'Greener Pastures' (pp 85-99). In 'Greener Pastures', the narrator leaves her university in Kano to attend an interview in Calabar and requires accommodation for the duration of her visit. One of the professors in the narrator's university suggests she stays with Flora and Steve in Calabar, stating that he and Flora were once schoolmates. When the narrator gets to the house, Flora refuses to be hospitable. This is because Flora suspects that her husband and the narrator may have a soft spot for each other: "In that ill-lit room, her glance shifted from her husband to me, straining through those lenses to detect any associations, unspoken intimacies." (p.88) Flora would, however, not take any chances and in spite of her husband's protestation, suggests hotels in Calabar that the narrator could stay in. When her husband's protest persists, she simply walks out on the two of them, "her husband muttering after her." (p. 88) The narrator is forced to leave.

In the first short story of the collection, 'Soulmates' (pp 3- 13), from which the collection takes its name, Anita takes a decisive step to prevent damage to her marriage and sends her husband's friend, Uncle Wahab, away from their home. Initially, Uncle Wahab is welcomed into the house, but when she notices that he has a corrupting influence on her husband, she sends him away. The reader is not informed categorically how this happens; rather, Ugbabe makes the reader infer this from the conversation between Anita and her husband, Bayo. (p. 12-13)

The narrator in 'Blessing in Disguise' (pp 27- 35) is yet another woman who 'vocalises' her protest against her husband, Benson, taking a second wife after thirty-three years of marriage. Benson seeks the initial agreement of his foreign wife by telling her that he needs to marry Blessing, an Igbo girl from his ethnic group, to end a family feud over land and secure his heritage. It is not until during the traditional wedding that the narrator realises that her husband has "planned this a long time ago" (p. 34). She decides to



leave abruptly: "It's not so much the man's betrayal, but the fact that I allowed myself to be cheated out of a life, without pulling the rug from under his feet first." (p. 35). While admitting that at fifty-two, she considers it too late to put up a fight and that the decision for a new life has suddenly been thrust upon her, she considers it somehow a new beginning, an opportunity to live for herself an independent life that is not necessarily tied to pleasing her husband. It will be a life of relevance and meaning to herself, as captured in the complaint by one of her friends, Helen, another 'expatriate wife' who has suffered similar humiliation: "I should have done this a long time ago. I sit like a Wedgewood ornament on the top shelf, gathering dust...things go on around me, but I am not consulted about anything." (p. 34)

'Survivor' (pp. 75-82) and 'Borrowed Feathers' (pp. 103-110) introduce another dimension to the role that Nigerian women play in issues of identity in Ugbabe's collection of stories. 'Survivor' tells the story of how Brenda, a non-Nigerian from the Dominican Republic married to Emeka, her Nigerian husband, survives the financial, matrimonial and traditional challenges she encounters. The narrator says that Brenda is adept at knowing where to get the best bargains for goods and services. She also offers advice to the narrator on how best to treat a man: "Be a partner, not a parent. Care for him but don't hover." (p. 78). She also generally gives ready-made responses to meet all matrimonial circumstances the foreign wife may encounter (pp 76, 77). The story of the 'Stew of the Week' (pp 77-78) shows how Brenda treats her husband when she gets tired of being given insufficient money for food. She sets the table as usual, but instead of food, she places the currency note her husband has given her on his plate. The narrator introduces the silent influence of Nigerian women in the story when she acknowledges: "I knew then that the outsider had acquired the tricks of the insider." (p. 78)

When her husband dies suddenly, Brenda successfully rebels against traditional practices that could affect her finances and the survival of family and children. She buys the coffin herself, locks



and secures the house and heads to the village to bury Emeka. She insists her husband must be buried in the only house he built in his village, in order to prevent it being sold or taken over by his relatives. Much later after the burial, Brenda is described as looking charming in gold jewellery and driving her husband's car (p. 82). This is an indication that, unlike what obtains in the Igbo tradition, where the widow is at the mercy of her husband's family, Brenda has succeeded in taking control of her life and husband's property.

In 'Borrowed Feathers' (pp 103-110), Sophie, the foreign wife of a Nigerian, acts uncharacteristically, by confronting and warning her husband's girlfriend to keep away from him. It is uncharacteristic because before now, Sophie "could never find the suitable words to return an insult or an unjust abuse; most of the time, things bubbled inside her as hurt." (p.103) This time, when she decides to speak out, she wonders, "That was most uncharacteristic of me." (p. 103) As she engages in the verbal combat with the suspected girlfriend, it is as though she represents all the wronged married women, getting "carried away with the sanctity of marriage" (p. 106). She reels out the names of the "experienced-in-betrayal friends" (p.107) in her mind, including Jacintha, who would challenge her husband in a verbal war where she always takes the lead (p. 107); Charity, her sister-in-law, who is a smart talker and takes after their mother; and Sophie's mother-in-law, who speaks "pure poetry when provoked":

She could strip you naked with her words in the middle of the street when you are fully clothed! She could cut you down to unrecognisable shreds when the timing was right. She could bowl you over with a conundrum. (p. 108)

Sophie's recall of her mother-in-law's statement that "every woman is sitting on a six-inch nail." (p. 110) universalises her experience of her husband's infidelity. This also confirms the inspiration that Sophie gets from her other married women friends, namely Jacintha and Charity. It should be pointed out here that the mother-in-law's apparent acceptance of her own husband's infidelity is not in conflict with her (the mother-in-law's) identity of vocality. The mother-in-law is hospitable to her husband's



mistress whenever she (the mistress) comes to spend the night, not because the mother-in-law is powerless to react, but because she considers women like that as belonging to "the class of household trash" (p.110) and, therefore, she remains unprovoked. Thus, there is no need for the mother-in-law to feel threatened or unleash her "pure poetry" on the mistress, as such vocality is only exhibited "when provoked." (p. 108).

Sophie's vocality may be uncharacteristic of her at the beginning, but she remains inspired by the 'borrowed feathers' in her mother-in-law's aphorisms, even as they continue to reverberate in her mind; and she wishes she could use more of them in her encounter with her husband's girlfriends (p. 110). In universalising Sophie's experience and making her 'borrow feathers' from other women, Ugbabe brings all women, particularly Indian and Nigerian women, into a common bond and, thus, dissolves the dichotomy between the insider and outsider that inter-racial marriage imposes on them.

### Conclusion

In this way, Kanchana Ugbabe's selected stories in *Soulmates* become significant as an examination of the various identities of married woman and the challenges they confront in their married life, especially the foreigners among them who are married to Nigerian men. These challenges reveal them as having two types of identities: in the first group are the 'expatriate' wives whose identities are tied to those of their husbands. The women in this group are voiceless, as they keep their frustrations and resentments within themselves. The second group comprises women who are vocal and readily express their feelings in various ways during their interaction with their husbands.

The study also reveals that Ugbabe presents the Nigerian women as being generally vocal, noting that this places them together with the second group of the foreign wives; thereby dissolving the dichotomy between the experiences of the two otherwise culturally-exclusive groups of women.



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