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Gender Roles in Chika Unigwe's *The Phoenix*

Akani, Julius Nsirim

Department of English Studies

University of Port Harcourt

Mobile Phone: +2348038746350

E-mail: juliusakani@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines gender roles in Chika Unigwe's *The Phoenix* (2007). In examining these gender roles, the paper focuses on the roles of both female and male genders in the novel in order to tease out issues that border on the marriage institution and gender *complementarity* in a multicultural setting. As we have attempted to show through our analyses, those issues of gender roles and gender relations that re-echo in Unigwe's novel need to be given enough critical attention. In other words, the need to highlight these issues is what motivates this study. The paper establishes that women are becoming more uncomfortable with the natural roles matrimony allots them. This has not helped issues, in terms of harmonious family relations. Finally, there is an urgent need to incorporate into national discourse issues raised by Unigwe in her novel on gender roles and gender relations as they concern Nigerians in the home nation or their host nations in this era of globalization.

Key words: Gender roles, gender relations, novelist, Globalization.

Introduction

Subjects of authority, class, gender, and race in literature are, in most cases, so inextricably intertwined that we need to understand all to understand one, hence the

need to think inclusively (*Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology* 70). Now, gender is derived from the Latin word *genus*, meaning kind. Most Indo-European Languages, namely German, Russian and Latin, always use three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. This is the reason why the Germans, for example, have *der Mann* for *the man* and *die Frau* for *the woman*. For *the girl* (neuter), the Germans say *das Mädchen*. In some other languages, like French, Italian, and Spanish we have only two genders. Even though gender is present in every language, it may not be correct to conclude that it is universal. In literature, as it is in this paper, the concern is with gender roles/relations, equity and inequality, when writing on or talking about gender. By these emphasis is laid on the pattern of behaviour and expectation that are considered appropriate or inappropriate in the society, in terms of speaking/writing about either the male or female sex. It is at this point that the subject of gender begins to link up with feminist criticism/study. Ian Buchanan writes that “the notion of gender was used in Second Wave feminism to separate individual attitudes and actions from physiology” (198). According to him, this is so as to debilitate the “biological determinist thesis” that tends to suggest that cultural attitudes reflect a particular nature of the body. Buchanan argues along the same line with Simone de Beauvoir who has written that “gender is an identity one adopts or creates” (qtd in Buchanan 198). Invariably, the question is: who decides what is expected for either the male or female gender in the society? To answer this question, a lot, of course, depends on whether a given society is patriarchal or matriarchal. The establishment of this fact usually leads literary theorists to begin to “encourage the bridging [of] the gender gap between men and women” (Nnolim 54). It must be stated that sex cannot be used interchangeably with gender. For purposes of clarification, sex is biological while gender is ideological. Gender is more about ideas that humans create for themselves.

Feminist novels react to female subjugation and maltreatment in marriage and ultimately project female assertion. And Feminist critics have been trying to reconstitute the manner we read literature so as to do justice to female points of views, interest, worth and value (Abrams 95). In terms of the origin of Feminist Criticism, critics will always draw our attention to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Right of Woman* (1792) and Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). Wollstonecraft’s book lends substantial support to literary critics when they are tracing the origin of feminism. Literary critics/theorists trace the origin of feminism to the 16th century, although Josephine Donovan, a feminist theorist, contends that there was an earlier feminist wave in the 15th century (Chioma Opara 12). As has been stated, feminism “sought to resolve issues like rape, sexual harassment and violence against women” (Opara 12-13). These are issues that have always been there since the origin of man. The rise of feminist movements/campaigns in Africa can be traced more to protests on issues of violence against women. The Lagos women’s protest of 1909 was

against the introduction of water rate; the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 was basically a fight against the colonial authority, these women rejected the idea of being counted because they give birth to children; and the Abeokwuta women's protest against colonial taxation in 1949 completed the third leg of the tripod, in terms of the struggle to eliminate violence against women in Africa (Opara 14). In recent times there have been other protests like the ones mentioned above.

It is pertinent to note that although the word feminism has its roots in the Latin word *femina* (which means woman) it did not make it to the lexicon of feminist critics and writers until the late 1880s. The most preferred terms/phrase before the term feminist became popular has been "women's rights" (Buchanan 166).

It has become the norm now to divide the history of feminism into three phases namely, First, Second, and Third Wave. In all the phases what usually emerges is "the signalling of a different era in the struggle to attain equality between sexes" (Buchanan 166). We are of the view that it is worth mentioning here that the long First Wave of feminism was used to fight so many wars against several injustices meted on women in the area of restriction, in terms of ownership of property, lack of protection against sexual violence and discrimination in the work place. Immediately suffrage was granted, campaign for women's rights began to wane and remained quiet until the late 1950. The early 1960s saw the rise of Second Wave feminism, reignited by the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Some critical theorists believe that the Second Wave feminism may have started before the early 1960s, with the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) in France (Abrams 93). With other women encouraged to take up the campaign against gender inequalities, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was formed in 1966. The Second Wave of feminism came to an end in the early 1980s but not without pushing for the ratification of an Equal Right Amendment to the constitution of the US. Again, we saw the end of an era because of perceived success. Third Wave feminism can be linked to the publication of Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Woman* (1991). At this point feminist scholars began to point out that feminists did not take certain issues like race and class into consideration. This gave rise to the emergence of different types of feminism. So we now have African feminism as against the much more radical brand of feminism advocated by American feminist scholars. This, of course, has led to a situation where feminist theoretical and critical writings continue to expand yearly in volume and range.

Although Unigwe's *The Phoenix* (2007) has not received enough critical attention, in terms of published critical works, one can still find some comments on the blurb, Wikipedia, and in Chibueze Orie's book. Chris Abani, according to comments on the blurb, is interested in the "moral urgency" with which Unigwe treats issues in

The Phoenix, and her “understanding of human condition” as depicted in the novel (n.pag.). Still on the blurb, we read that Unigwe is only interested in the novel’s examination of “how tragic loss can totally consume a human being” (n.pag.). Also, as contained in the blurb, Unigwe’s novel:

Tells the story of a young Nigerian woman married to a Belgian who is forced to confront two tragedies in succession: the accidental death of her young son, and the discovery that she has cancer. The story itself is related in the form of an internal monologue as she journeys by train from her home to the clinic through a hostile winter landscape. (n.pag.)

The portion cited from the blurb, above, makes it clear that the novel is about the experiences of a Nigerian who lives abroad. In fact, other part of this comments state clearly that the novel “makes us see what it means to be” a Nigerian in “an unfriendly climate” in some European country (n.pag.). Implicit in the quotation above is the fact that the novel is narrated by a narrator who uses the “internal monologue” technique.

According to comments posted on Wikipedia by Daria Tunca of Universite dé Liege, “some of the subjects examined in her [Unigwe’s] work are physical and mental illness, Immigration to Belgium, and prostitution” (n.pag.). It is important to note that this study focuses on the issues of immigration and prostitution. It is in the light of this that these comments come close to what the study will examine in a broader way.

Orie, in his *Who is a Woman Being? 21st Century Nigerian Female Debut Novels*, writes that Unigwe’s

The Phoenix is chillingly and surreally curious in its reporting of an existential torture, of life of agony, of the living–dead, of insuperable reminiscence of unwanted, dreaded, not-of-age death.

... the reader encounters a one who interiorizes one’s odyssey and writes one’s epitaph having lost all hope of living while one is living, or rather existing. (89)

Orie’s argument, as seen in the quotation above, is that Unigwe’s novel negates the unanimously held belief that literature is primarily meant to teach and amuse. There is nothing amusing or entertaining about Unigwe’s novel as it falls under some novels that Orie classifies as being filled with stories that are “excruciatingly painful, as they are lachrymose” (89). Orie does not just stop at the painful feelings that the protagonist-narrator expresses because of her sick son, who later died of course. He goes ahead to write in his book that:

She sadly finds Belgian socio-cultural, political, religious and economic conditions awkward and hostile to her person and

background. She manages to stay but only to realize that it is her shadow that lives or pretends to live there. (92)

It is obvious from the comments above that no critic can possibly miss the main issue in Unigwe's *The Phoenix*: the hostile condition that some Nigerians live in foreign countries. In Unigwe's novel, this bitter diasporic experience is conspicuous, one cannot possibly miss it. According to Orie, loneliness is another disease, like cancer and "things are simply strange" over there in Belgium where Oge lives (93).

Unigwe's *The Phoenix*: An Overview

Chika Unigwe's *The Phoenix* is a novel that focuses on the existence of torture, a life of agony, the living dead and the full effects of untimely death on the bereaved ones. The novel records how Oge, the protagonist-narrator, feels after the tragic loss of her son, Jordi Eze Wouters.

In terms of structure, the novel is divided into eleven (11) chapters. The writer does not mark out the novel by denoting the chapters with proper title headings and chapter numbers, but one cannot fail to observe the eleven different sections/chapters as they are clearly indicated in the novel. The first chapter of the novel introduces the readers to Oge, in a train. She is embarking on a journey to the hospital where she is eventually diagnosed with cancer (22). This chapter begins with a one-word sentence: Damascus. And she refers to that fearful journey to the hospital as a "Damascus trip." This Damascus trip helps in revealing that the protagonist is not only a mother who loses her son, it also reveals that she is faced with a potentially terminal disease. She is likely going to die, like her son. Through discussion between Oge and other characters in the train, we learn of the ignorance of the Europeans who think that Africa is beautiful but poor. Contrary to their belief that Europe is a lot better than Africa, Oge knows that the house she shares with her husband in Belgium, Europe, is only as big as her father's guest house back home in Enugu, Nigeria

Chapter two reveals more about this woman's bravery and courage after the doctor drops "the word" about her cancer status. The information she gets may have sent a chill from the tip of her toe to the roots of her hair but she is determined to stay alive and mourn the death of the lovely son that she has already lost to the cold hands of death.

In chapter three, we read of the queer system of giving birth and mothering in Europe, or what Oge calls Western curse. The new system in Europe, France in particular, is for women to give birth "under X" thereby producing children who are "floating, rootless, with nowhere for their tentacles to grasp" (37). In Africa, the reverse is the case, as women are always ready to take care of children, such that "when one

mother is tired another takes over.” In fact, there were several pairs of eyes watching each child in Africa.

Chapter four focuses specifically on how a character known as Angel is cremated after her death. Her mother and others around her believe that “it was AIDS that killed her” (61). Angel’s death makes Oge to recall how her own son is cremated after he died. The strange reaction of Gunter, her husband, after he learns of her pregnancy is one of the major issues that are raised in chapter five. Oge’s husband never really wanted to have a child with Oge as shown by his action. He quickly cremates the boy’s body after he was confirmed dead without informing his wife. She is left to imagine what was in the urn in the Vitrine in the sitting room. The urn, of course, had the dead boy’s ashes. The narrative continues to dwell on the urn and what is in the urn in chapter six.

The narrator, who also doubles as the protagonist, focuses on issues of her Christian faith in chapter seven. She believes that her dead son will one day walk back to her alive by virtue of some “miracling” (113). She always speaks of the boy in the present while her husband talked about the boy in the past: “Jordi was a beautiful baby” (126). And this made Oge to hate her husband the more, as we read in chapter eight. On the first Christmas morning, after she learns of how cancer is eating her up, she discovers that the hatred has still not abated (130). Emphasis shifts to the visit of Oge’s mother to Belgium in chapter nine. After arguing for days (and weeks) about the impropriety of his mother -in-law’s visit, Oge’s husband finally caves in. At least her coming would help “coax Oge into accepting” that Jordi is dead.

Finally, the story reaches its end in the last two chapters with Oge’s mother making her (Oge) understand that the boy’s death does not signify the end of her own life. At least she has the cancer battle ahead of her, she accepts her fate. The internet becomes her refuge as she starts searching for information about cancer. This is the first major step she takes in her fight against the dreaded disease. In this brief overview of Unigwe’s *The Phoenix* the main issue remains the accentuation of the hostile condition Nigerians in an alien host nation face. Loneliness, as hinted earlier in this study, is a kind of disease, like cancer. However, it is obvious that Oge’s role in the novel, as against that of her husband, is well worth the consideration we shall give it in this paper. Like the phoenix, Oge’s life is indeed filled with amazing stories. The phoenix, an amazingly large bird of a timeworn fable, is believed to have burned itself after it reached 500years of age. It later arose from its own ashes and whenever it is mentioned in literature, the symbol of death and resurrection is evoked in the mind of the student of literature. The death of Oge’s son and news of her diagnosis did not overshadow the fact that Unigwe presents her as a courageous woman in the novel.

Gender Roles in *The Phoenix*

Critical theorists have defined gender roles as actions, prospects, and demeanour that are believed to be suitable in a particular situation in human societies for the members of either the female or male gender/sex. Gender role raises our awareness as to the degree of affiliation to masculinity or femininity. This perhaps explains why male characters are presented in a more positive light than female characters in male-authored novels. But with the rise of feminist criticism and feminist oriented novels, especially those written by women, female characters are made to play more positive roles. Again, this explains the need for a reassessment of gender roles in contemporary Nigerian novels, written by women/a woman. This will be done in a way that the main issue in the novel will be analyzed, so as to place in perspective gender roles in the novel under study. The main issue in Unigwe's novel is the bitter diasporic experiences Nigerians in diaspora face out there, especially in Belgium.

The roles played by Gunter in *The Phoenix* are not in any way complementary to those of his wife, Oge. The roles played by females and males in matrimony are supposed to be complementary. But this is not what we read in the novel under study here. The main quality of being a husband is *husbandhood* which entails that the husband as the head of the family must love his wife. In our analysis, this is not what we discover in the relationship between Gunter and Oge. Gunter does not provide his shoulders for Oge to lean on as she grieves over the death of their son, Jordi. This, in a way goes ahead to show that Gunter is incompetent in playing the role of a husband.

The thrust of this section is to examine the roles Oge, a woman and wife, plays in

The Phoenix as against those of her husband Gunter. With Oge, Unigwe presents her readers with a female character that cannot be seen as the weaker sex. Oge is strong. Before and after

Dr. Suikerbuik informs her that "the lumps we found were cancerous" (22), that she has been diagnosed with cancer, she is already determined to be strong. Oge has realized that there will be series of difficult situations against her, and she recognizes the "marks," the "two lines" on her face as "marks of pain" (22 -23). Unigwe presents Oge as a courageous woman. Though we read that she is diagnosed of cancer, we do not see her break down. She seems determined to live, without much support from her husband, the man of the house. She sees everything that is happening, especially when the doctor informs her that she has been diagnosed of cancer, as a dream. "Maybe this is just a bad dream [... the type] you would wake up from... and your life would go on" (24). She decides to banish the word cancer from her head because of her determination to live (25). She wants to make the doctor understand that she "cannot

have cancer because it is not an African disease!” (26) Oge believes that “cancer puts one in a war situation and the only way to face it is to battle it” (28). It seems Unigwe deliberately creates a woman, Oge, to do that battle, instead of a man like Oge’s husband, Gunter.

In the novel it is Oge who shows more love and care to Jordi, their only son. That she is always thinking of the boy’s proper supervision by his school teachers, conjures up an image of a courageous woman instead of that of a weaker vessel. Oge wants to start a campaign that will raise issues of proper supervision of school children, but “Gunter did not want to know” (30), and he did not care enough for the boy. There is a reversal of role here. It is obvious that Unigwe presents her readers with a story that is totally devoid of any assumption that is based on superiority or inferiority complex. The issue of “the supremacy of man over the woman” is laid to rest in Unigwe’s *The Phoenix*. There is not much about this supremacy in the way Oge relates with Gunter. As hinted earlier, Oge takes care of certain situations that ought to be taken care of by Gunter in male-authored novels. Oge does everything possible to honour the memory of Jordi. Ample example can be found in the novel about how she takes care to buy the type of Christmas tree that Jordi would have loved to have in the house. Even when she places the tree in the living room, she knew “that was the way Jordi liked it” (33). She resigns to wondering why “Gunter would complain again about how high the star (placed on the tree) was... he complained too much these days, anyway. The only important thing was what Jordi wanted” (33). Only what Jordi wanted matters to Oge. There is no gainsaying on the role a man plays as the head of the family, what should not be encouraged is the relegation of the female gender to the background. Unigwe seems to be against this and it is shown clearly in her novel. It is Oge that makes sure that Jordi is given “the Christmas of his dreams. Every child had a right to that” (33). Make a note of the fact that Gunter should be the one playing the role Oge plays in the novel. He should be the one to provide what Jordi wants. No. Unigwe would have none of that. For Unigwe, a woman can play that role too. Women can play the game. Gunter seems to be interested in keeping away the memory of Jordi. He hurriedly burnt the remains of Jordi immediately the doctor confirms the baby dead. In his desperate attempt to stop Oge from bothering him with Jordi’s memory, he finally takes her to “the oak vitrine: to show her the remains of Jordi in the “transparent urn” (129). Events leading to Jordi’s birth and death at the age of five all point to one direction (99). Gunter is never interested in having a baby in the first place. His first reaction when Oge informs him that she is expecting a baby is to make her understand that he “had not even known we were trying for a baby” (87). Gunter would later tell Oge “that he had not felt ready to be a father.” (88) He questions Oge because she “conceived Jordi” (87). In fact, he asks: “were you not on the pill?” (88) One would have expected him to show much concern about having children (not just a child).

Instead, it is the wife that shows interest in having children as an African wife of a European husband.

The refusal of Gunter to approve of the things Oge did to honour the memory of their late son may not be unconnected to the fact that Jordi is dead. Unigwe, it seems, only wants to show how it is possible for the male and female sex to switch roles: “Gunter would tell you it was unnecessary (because) he did not love Jordi with a mother’s love” (35). In fact, he did not show enough of a father’s love, as the novel reveals. Going further, in terms of the courage and bravery exhibited by Oge, Unigwe writes that she (Oge) comes from a lineage of assertive, loving and caring women: “where you come from a child has many mothers. When one mother is tired, another takes over” (37). One cannot possibly miss the point here; it is conspicuous: This is another way of saying that women care for children more than men. This could also be another way of stating that Oge’s ability to play her role effectively as a mother is traceable to her roots, where she comes from in Africa. The mutual love, respect and understanding that exist back home where she comes from help to bring about peace in matrimonial homes. The lack of gender complementarity seen in *The Phoenix* cannot be unconnected to the absence of mutual love, respect and understanding in the family where he comes from in Europe, even though this is not stated clearly in the novel. Back home, in Enugu, where Oge comes from, “you were never lonely” but “loneliness has become [a] way of life in Brussels” (74). Back home in Enugu, family members always visited freely, but in Belgium “every guest was expected, every visit planned with military precision” and Oge finds it difficult to get used to this culture of her husband’s people (74).

The irony of all that is written in *The Phoenix* is that “Gunter was built like a wrestler” (46). He is so strong, yet he does not act strong. He does not protect his wife and child. Oge does more in the novel to show she is the one that is ever protective of both husband and child. It is as if she is the man of the house. Well, there can be a woman of the house too, as Unigwe has shown. One cannot pretend not to know that Unigwe writes from her background as an African female writer. There is a belief in the African continent that Africa is maternal (Ousmane Sembene 124). It is common among Africans to show a special love towards our mothers. The African man is very mother-oriented; he does not only love his mother he swears by his mother. Apart from the aforementioned, one more thing is sure, every man loves a woman. We love our wives, daughters and mothers. Notwithstanding attempts to subjugate the woman, more than 50 percent of the African population is female. There is actually no need for women oppression and female subordination, as we read in earlier African novels, especially male-authored novel like Achebe’s *Things Fall apart* and *Arrow of God*.

This is not an attempt to give excuses for Gunter's roles. He is not African, as the novel shows, but the role of *husbandhood* demands that the man should love the wife. In Africa, men are not easily overtaken by grief and difficult situation, the man is not supposed to show emotion like the woman will do yet this should not be used as an excuse by men in any part of the world for why they should fail in playing the role matrimony assigns them. Gunter did not only fail to complement Oge, he also fails to learn from her. Had they worked together in the novel as husbands and wives do, he would have learnt a few things indirectly from her. This would have taught him about humanity and in a way Africanize him to some extent.

This study observes that Oge does more to accommodate Gunter. Things are done differently in Unigwe's novel. In order to accommodate Gunter, Oge hid her soup spices in plastic boxes. Yet Gunter "complained that it was hard to get rid of the smell of Igbo Soup. He said the smell stayed in the house..." (71). He did not like this. He could do nothing to accommodate his wife's preferences. On the other hand, Oge does everything possible "to find favourites among food which did not annoy (her) husband. Potatoes and bread. Pasta and Cheese" (71). She tries to please him by learning how to prepare foreign delicacies. She buys "cookbooks and read them... [she] bought vegetable with names you could hardly pronounce" (72). It beats one's imagination to how her husband will have nothing to do with "the smell of Igbo soup," whereas on the other hand she "did not want to drive him away" (71). She makes effort to grapple with "*stoofovlees*, Chicory rolled in ham and cheese. Macaroni... Aubergines...with a concoction of shrimps and tuna" (72). Günter detests Oge's "spices" but Oge's makes effort to appreciate his "concoction." Make a note of the fact that Gunter does all these at a time he is expected to protect his wife from depression. At a time when Oge is feeling depressed, Gunter still goes ahead to show his displeasure at her "spices", mere spices.

Unigwe's novel shows that the marginalization or *thingification* of women and the subsequent female subjugation that follow marginalization are now being relegated to the background. The stereotypical portrayal of women as silent, passive and docile beings is no longer the order of the day. There is a new perspective in the way women are portrayed by writers, especially female writers. Earlier, female writers like Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta even try to portray women as docile beings. To make the matter more complicated, they create female characters like mothers-in-law that maltreat fellow women.

Finally, Unigwe's success in her attempt to swap male gender roles for female gender roles, vice versa, lies in her ability to create the character of Oge. Through Oge we learn that Gunter does not seem to have played the role fatherhood allocates him appropriately. The ability of being a father is what we refer to as fatherhood in this

work. And playing this role (of fatherhood) is a role that is exclusively reserved for males. On the other hand, motherhood is the ability of being a mother; females play this role, as it is exclusively reserved for them. As made obvious in Unigwe's *The Phoenix*, Gunter fails to play his role effectively and by extension did not complement his wife adequately in the novel. Gunter's inability to play his role makes the proposition of peaceful matrimony impossible. We cannot overstate the importance of gender roles in marital affairs. Gender roles are complementary even though they are different, as we have already hinted. What is actually stressed in this work is that none of these roles (of fatherhood or motherhood) should be overlooked in matrimony. Unigwe's novel also tends to suggest that she is in support of African feminism. She makes Oge to feel like a Nigerian whereas Günter feels like Europeans. But through Chief (Dr.) Angus Ebube Nti, Oge's father, Unigwe makes it clear that "the grief of losing a child was absolute" (141). It is not a coincidence that an African, Doc, is the one that makes this comment in the novel.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can write that in Unigwe's *The Phoenix*, gender roles are highlighted, with emphasis on the roles Oge, a woman and wife, plays in the novel, when compared to those of Gunter, a man and husband. It was revealed that the author of the novel has presented her readers with a female character they cannot comfortably refer to as a weaker sex. When Oge is diagnosed with cancer, we are not informed of what her husband does to encourage and comfort her. But we are told she is already determined to remain strong. She is presented as a strong and courageous woman all through the novel, as our analysis showed.

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