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Portrayal of Women Characters in Selected Contemporary Yoruba Novels in Nigeria

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Abstract

Contemporary Yoruba novelists and critics have done tremendous works in portraying female characters in their literary production. For example, Okediji (1981) in Atoto Arere portrays female characters as mother, wife, sister, prostitute, harsh and malicious, who always keep malice against others. Some other novelists and critics like Olabimtan (1993), Orilawe Adigun, Sobande (1959) Rigimo Obinrin o se tu and Adeyemi (2005) Oga Niya Mi among others celebrate womanhood in their novels. They portray women as loving, hardworking, serious-minded and people of dignity and character. This paper is a continuation of the discourse. It examines three novels namely Fila lobinrin, Igba Oro and Eru o bodo and evaluates how female characters in the novels are portrayed. The feminist approach has been adopted as our theoretical framework.

Introduction

The modern novels are multifarious. There are social, historical, detective, feminist and political novels. With these, dynamism has been brought to Yoruba novels. They have been transformed from the romantic novels of the Fagunwa era to modern novels. Some of these novels reveal the role and

status of women in the ancient time and the modern time. We shall examine Fila L'obinrin, Igba Oro and Eru O b'odo and evaluate how female characters are portrayed. These texts were selected because they are captivating, while the writers strive hard to portray women in numerous forms, about their character, thought and their idiosyncrasies.

The novels were written by male writers namely; Bode Akinola, Olu Owolabi and Talabi Olagbemi respectively. Our theoretical framework is the feminist theory. What are the observations made about female characters in this novel? Do they portray the masculinist views about female characters? These and many more were examined in this study.

Conceptual Framework

Character is peculiar to each and everyone in life. It serves as a portrayal, identification as well as a symbol that shows the manner, role and status of each and everyone in the society. "Symbolic character" is peculiar to the living and non-living things of various sexes or gender. Character among various tribes, religion and nation often varies. Also, characters of gender (male and female) do bear peculiarity, essentially because of variations and disparity between cultural, custom and traditional affiliations. Interestingly, Oxford English Dictionary (2004) defines characters thus:

all the mental or moral qualities that make a person, group, nation etc. different from others. What it is and different from others. Interesting or unusual qualities or features like ability, the ability to handle difficult or dangerous situations. Person in a novel or play, reputation, letter, sign or mark used in writing or printing.

Drawing inference from the above, character in the thought and reasoning of culture, religion and tribe technically signposts a connotation of moral qualities, which are peculiar to each an every individual, group, person or nation. Character, within the context of this paper refers to actor or person in whom the story of the novel revolves around.

Theoretical Framework

There are numerous theories that could help explain human society, human beings as well as their characters and disposition. So also, irrespective of sex, age, creed or race, theory equally enhances perfect understanding and consequently building a virile comprehension and appreciation of the subject

matter being discussed. Hence, theories like traditionalist theory, structuralist theory, functionalist theory, hermeneutics theory and feminism or womanism theory, which is purely a gender oriented theory, helps to sustain a deep down understanding and appreciation of the matter at stake.

There have been series of submissions by the women right activists and defenders of feminist theory. Tong (1992) posits that:

Feminist theory is not one but many theories or perspectives, attempts to describe women's oppression to explain its causes and consequences and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation.

The Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English (1948) says: "Feminism is a movement for complete equality between men and women in every way".

While Barr (1987) sees feminism as a sort of means to evoke in analyzing, Kolawole (1992) asserts that feminism could be segmented into four categories based on the understanding of different groups of people. The first group agreed that there should be equality between male and female in the society. The second group contains the followers of Karl MTheir reasoning stood on the premises that woman could not be independent without societal re-structuring. The third group includes the feminist activists that are against sex discrimination. To this people, they are of the view that whatever is good for the gander is equally good for the goose, male and female must necessarily have equal rights and privileges so that their responsibility will be the same. These people are known as lesbians, they are against woman subjugation or submissiveness to man. The fourth group is the African women activists that premised their theory on customs and traditions. They are mostly concerned with the woman rights. Kolawole (1997) opines that:-

Womanhood is central and this is neither controversial nor conflictual to African woman. So, they are not seeking to be like men, look like men, or necessarily act like men.

As it is known, 'Woman Right' activist was founded in the United States of America (USA) and Europe in 1800, purposely because of undue treatment inflicted on women in the society. The American Government intended to silence woman and deny them the freedom of speech while American constitution forbids women's rights. They could not vote or be voted for and they could only be engaged in selective jobs. Women were abysmally

relegated. The birth of the group then was consequential to the cause and effect of registering dismay and protest.

Similarly, there is no place in other countries of the world, where women do not face challenge(s) in the society. Arthur, (1969) discusses a bit on these challenges. She says that our status as a woman has to do with things that are happening to us. She asserts that women are facing some challenges that men are not facing in the society. For instance, rape, polygamy without due information, re-marrying widow, women inheritance, women trafficking, early marriage, ignominious appreciation of women during their menstrual period, domestic officer, parentage, as the core women duties. So also, women are not credited for these roles. The issue of change of name from one's surname to spouse name after marriage and leaving one's parents house to join the spouse's family is tarnishing women's image. It incapacitates women and renders them toothless without being able to take sole decision or take step or action as they wish on those challenges that they are facing in the society.

Feminism theory has both advantages and disadvantages. For instance, considering the customs and beliefs of the black race, particularly, the Yoruba race, it takes cognisance of the African culture, Yoruba feminism does not disregard family affairs and marriage institution because it runs contrary to the norms, and customs of our race. Family affairs and marriage institution are held in high esteem in Africa. Scholars have argued on the marital affairs, that motherhood, wife and childhood status is very much important in the discussion of black race, custom and tradition. This is why Walker (1983) suggests 'Woman Rights' theory in place of womanism or feminism, because of the dichotomy between the European and African view(s) or thought(s).

Without procrastinating, the main thrust of feminism lies in it's strive to fight for women's right against oppression most especially, in the area of marriage. The major proponent of this theory sees marriage institution as methodologically oriented, which should be procedurally pursue.

Both the male and the female hold marriage institution in high esteem. Hence, the regard that wife has for her husband's family and friend is very high.

The proponents of feminism agree that the black race has much regard for the woman life. There is cognisance that virile womanhood and blissful marital life is of major concern. The 'Women Right' activists are not in support of the contemporary love affair without turning to God to select husbands and wives for them. Ogunyemi (1988) adds that 'Woman Right' theory calls for a deep-down research on the men that are proponents of feminism, in such way that it will benefits both male and female. It is more rewarding and dignifying to be strictly obedient. Otherwise, one is likely to meet his/her Waterloo. It is this particular view that makes Kolawole (1997) to further stress on the appreciation of 'Woman Right' theory that actually, African women (black women) are against cheating by men in line with custom wherever appropriate. Also, men are the head wherever it is similarly appropriate. In short, women have societal roles and they also authorize the society to control them particularly, on how to uplift and better the societal lots for the benefits of all and sundry. It is this type of liberal feminism that we adapt in this study without losing the focus to defend the rights of the women.

Plot Construct of the Three Selected Novels

The plot in each of the three novels examined is simple and straightforward. Events are arranged in sequential order while each scene is logically presented without complexity. In a cause and effect manner, one event leads to another, while the reader will not like to lose focus on any of the discourse content of the novels. The plot construct of each of the texts is interesting.

Fila L'obinrin

Contemporary Yoruba novels are vastly portraying female characters in different dimensions and various colourations. However, *Fila l'obinrin* written by Akinola (1984) presented how easily women fall prey to deceit and gullible to men's prank in the bid to woo them.

So also, it vividly revealed the poor and incoherent thoughtfulness among women in deciding their future. Particularly, when it has to do with the issue of marriage, they largely and fastly regret their marriages. Hence, these inadequacies greatly resulted into an endless divorce and single parent, which is a great assault on child development and inadequate parental care. In the same vein, the departure from the traditional practice by consulting soothsayer on divinity, the prospect of the proposed union was equally identified as another hurdle. This is reflected in the case of Yemi, who

intended to marry Remi and deceitfully took her as a wife without the marriage due process. But later on, the marriage was fruitless. Remi's parents showed concern and consulted soothsayer who professed that the solution to this problem was for Remi to divorce and marry Supo, as the panacea to that childlessness. This was how the novel derived its title, *Fila l'obinrin*. Women or ladies are like caps, it is only God that destines the man whom the cap fits.

Igba Oro

This novel, *Igba oro* written by Owolabi (2001), is a standing revelation and wholesome cast of the contemporary polygamous home in Africa particularly, in the Southern part of the Sahara and in the South Western part of Nigeria, populated by the Yoruba speaking people.

The novel centres its story on Aborode, who was incited to take second wife after Labimpe. They found out that the only way for them to succeed in fomenting trouble and cast evil on the Aborode family was to convince him to take a second wife, which arose out of jealousy and hatred they had for the family. Immediately he took a second wife, vicissitude took turn on the family and their home never again enjoyed peace and harmony. Labimpe, Aborode's first wife who is a cool headed woman, was dragged to the extreme by the second wife, Asake. There was no peace in the house, hence, Aborode thought of taking a third wife. The accumulation of three wives brought discord and hatred instead of concord, leading to internal war and spiritual battle. However, later on, God repaid the evil doers, Asake and Adejoke i.e. the second and third wives and they harvested their deeds. At the end, Labimpe, a loving and responsible woman triumphed.

Eru O Bodo

Eru O Bodo, a novel written by Olagbemi (1988), centres on the person of Bayo, who used money to lure women to have illicit affairs with them. So also, the kind nature of women and high level of poverty among the indigent students becomes the instrument Bayo exploited to woo women and mess up their lives.

Truly, Bayo is a replica of his father and finally he outscored the exploit of his father. Bayo, a civil servant and a revenue officer, who has been using his office recklessly, engaged in excessive drinking and extravagancy. He destroyed the lives of many young ladies and had hand in many failed

marriages. He spoiled both old and younger women with gifts and the elders could not even caution him because of what he was giving them. The novel was a stark revelation of the level of moral decadence of the society and the level of immorality among the men, women and all age groups in the society.

Portrayal of Women Characters in the Novels

Beyond any doubt, definitely, there are various perspectives to the issue of women in the society. Indeed, there are many great deal of work on the issues that have to do with women character generally in life. Women had been portrayed as wicked, heartless, prostitute, mother, wife, sister, deceit, partner, and confidants. Sobande (1959) rightly observed in *Rigimo Obirin Ko Se etu* that women are good and as well, bad. They are viewed as unavoidable companion for men, without them, life is not alright. Thus, he corroborated his view with the Yoruba philosophical belief about them particularly, on their behaviour and put it as follows:-

Awon Obinrin ni iyo aye,
Awon kan naa ni so iyo di obu.
Ko see ni, ko se e fe ku ni won.
Bi won ba huwa apanimoyoda lonii,
won a se gege bi agbani lojo to buru lola.
obinrin nii sekun derin.
Awon kan naa nii so Oyin di iwo.
Amoko rerin, amuorogun wugbo.
Ibi ti won ba nlo ni won ko ipako si.
Won ko soro koo,
sugbon won soro o ya fun.

(Women are the salt of Earth, the same ones that make salt to loose its taste. Silent killer of today, timely saviour of tomorrow women turn sadness to joy. They also turn honey to poison she gladdens her mate to jealousy. She faces where she is not going. Easy to come by but difficult to part with).

In another vein, some other critics like Opadokun (1991) and Oyesakin (1982, 1984 and 1985) portrayed women in their various works in bad light because of the numerous atrocities that women commit. While Abimbola (1969) equally explained in one *ese-ifa*, (Oyekumeji) how one woman

betrayed her husband after collecting money, by giving him away to his enemy to capture.

In spite of the fact that, the works of the writers cited above do not portray women in good light, we are of the view that women cannot be totally bad. Definitely, there must be good aspects about them, which these writers have refused to discuss. However, as said earlier, this study intends to review the subject matter; portrayals of women characters and also evaluate the views of the writers about women in general through the literary lens of the selected novelists.

The three novels examined, portrayed the contemporary Nigerian society. No doubt, the setting, the language use, the theme as well as the characterization expected in every literary work accordingly reflected the picture of the society. These qualities make their works to be very close to reality even though, it is fictitious.

In our society today, there are many instances where polygamous houses exemplify terrible war zones, where every member particularly, the wives are always on each other's neck. A situation whereby, they employ all sort of means to out-do one another, employing charm and invoking spiritual power over one another to gain control of the family and a times, to eliminate other wives. Basically, ungodliness and lack of trust are often the daily routine in polygamous home coupled with enormous unrest and restlessness on the part of every member. Similar thing was reported in The Nigerian Tribune (2006) titled 'what a jealousy'? It was such a brutally devilish scene where a junior wife eventually burnt the entire members of the family overnight when she set their house ablaze. This incident is clearly pictured in Igba Oro, whereby in subordination of the first wife dragged Aborode to become polygamous. When Aborode eventually became polygamous, his three wives eventually turned his home into a battlefield, peace and tranquility evaded their home. They started fighting one another over frivolous issues, which nearly collapsed the family. But at long last, the wickedness of the wives were exposed and the good wife blessed.

The writers of the novels depicted some African settings, culture and belief. For instance, Yemi was asked to marry his late brother's wife in Fila l'obinrin, Remi was asked to divorce Yemi as the only recipe for her barrenness. So also, in Igba Oro, Aborode's family depicts a typical

polygamous life with all manners of enmity among the wives, the use of charms and other devilish act to torment one another. So also in *Eru O bodo*, the setting reveals how people worship money, harbour deception and love dishonesty. This is shown by the inability of the village leaders and renowned elders like Alagba Rufoosi to caution Bayo and call him to order.

Women in the three novels can be grouped into two categories, the good and the bad. The two groups were rewarded according to their deeds in order to serve as lessons for others. Women in the three plays were **portrayed as** lovers of money and material wealth. They were portrayed as victims of primitive capitalism.

In *Igba Oro*, only Labimpe was salvaged out of the three wives married by Aborode, when they were at war with themselves, charming and doing all sorts of things to eliminate one another. But Labimpe, the only righteous wife, finally triumphed in spite of all odds posed both by their neighbours and her co-wives. She is an example of a good woman whereas in *Fila l'obinrin*, Remi allowed herself to be deceived by antics and tricks of men because of her lust for material wealth. In the end, she remained barren until her parent's intervention. In her own case, she was awfully rewarded when she choosed to be a bad woman; so also, she was rewarded when she changed by turning a new leaf having learnt her lessons. Women's lust for money and material wealth is the highest in rank when it comes to causes of women weakness. It was this particular weakness that Bayo capitalized on in his amorous relationship with women, which had no bound. As he is amorous, having affairs with family members' wives, so also, he was snatching his friends' and neighbours' wives. He also had series of affairs with many spinsters, as it was revealed in *Eru O bodo*. In this novel, women exhibit a large chunk of negativity, which was an outright bad character that is not a good omen for the progressive development of our society. Younger ones should not copy this sort of mannerism; otherwise, it will spell doom for the society. Much more, at this time the whole world is strenuously waging war against the menace and scourge of HIV/AIDS in our contemporary society.

Women characters are resoundingly and objectively portrayed. They are susceptible to gullibility, they have lust for money, jealous of one another and they are not upright. They have been most ebulliently and realistically portrayed.

Evaluation of the Portrayal of Women Characters in the Novels

The theme of the novels genuinely points to the central issue in each of the novels. This, in other words, realistically and effectively portrayed the story and characters as they are, while the setting and the language technique clearly show a total Yoruba community.

The women character can be viewed from two perspectives (positive and negative) and varies with situation. Also, it is subject to individual idiosyncrasy and disposition. Of course, it is outright impossible to vouch that the generality of women are bad, while it is equally false to assert that women are good in totality. Labimpe, the wife of Aborode in Igba Oro stood out fastidiously as an exemplary woman. She weathered all storms and came out triumphantly in the face of the many vicissitudes and various downturns and up-downs. But nevertheless, she remained steadfast and at last succeeded both in her marital life and polygamous matrimonial home.

On the other hand, Bayo in Eru O b'odo was able to abuse women of easy virtue women with money and made them submissive to him. He engaged them, both old and younger ones, in amorous relationship. He was able to do this with bad ones among the women. The character of women in this novel is most largely in bad light and wide exploration of women amorosity, recklessness and indiscipline way of life. The feminist theory is totally against lazy women who are more interested in wealth-consumption rather than wealth-creation.

Similarly, women lust for money and material things resulted in failed marriage as seen in Yemi before she re-married to Supo in Fila l'obinrin. It was the material things that initially influenced her decision to change her mind to marry Yemi because she heard that he was traveling abroad.

Significantly, woman's role in the family cannot be overshadowed by any measure. Women are better known as builders and keepers of home. They oversee and ensure that peace and tranquility reign supreme in the family. However, in the novel, Fila l'obinrin, Yawe, Ogunyemi's second wife is frustrated in her bid to maintain peace and harmony in the family because Bimpe, the most junior wife refused to co-operate with her. All her effort was rendered abortive. At the peak of it, Yawe was sent out for Bimpe. Bimpe's disposition reveals the manner in which women ridicule themselves and lower their integrity before men. Hence, in consequential, this has firmly established the superiority of men and control over women.

Similarly, the way Bose protested against the wish of Ogunyemi to marry Remi instead of her, grossly ridicule women folk, while the way and manner Yemi handled the issue was grossly unfair and wicked. Man has the right to choose wife but not with the intention of frustrating women. Women and ladies deserve honors and respect during courtship.

Bode Akinola viewed women as men's equity that are subject of inheritance in fila lo'binrin. Marrying widow as an inheritable equity is an oppression by men over women. Adeoti forced herself on Yemi, the junior brother of her late husband whom she wanted to marry, as a result of societal appreciation of widow, But Yemi did not view her as their inheritable equity. It was Yemi's mother herself that fought for women's right by opposing the family's suggestion that Adeoti should not be inherited for her son. However, our observation is that a woman that lost her husband must have the privilege to decide her freedom and liberty. Tradition should not decide for widows against their conscience. They should equally take concrete steps to show their dissatisfaction against the measure. So also, it is not worthwhile to see that it is women that will give support to men oppressive tendency over them, by supporting women inheritance culture was reflected in Fila L'obinrin where Bimpe refused to support Ogunyemi's stepson proposal to inherit Adeoti. It is incumbent on all the female folk to rise up against the ignominious act whereby women are down grading themselves to reclaim their right.

The act and practice of favouritism employed by Ogundele is starkly sad. He favours male children on the issue of education against female children. Ogundele remarks that parents derive nothing by sending women to school, it is like wasting of money. He said.

Oore ki lo 'mo eye maa se fun
iya re? A fi bi yoo dagba ti
yoo fo lo (oju ewe kejila).

What good, will new bird give
as reward to its maternal?
Only to grow up and fly away
(p.12).

This shows the masculinist bias against women education. It depicts the ignorance of some men about the needs to educate the female child. The notion that women will finally move to her spouse abode does not translate to

means that they can not be useful to their parents, family acquaintance and themselves. In the recent time, many parents are having good time, courtesy of their female children, more than their sons. So also, women are equally holding many positions of responsibility today like their male counterparts.

Owolabi noted in Igba Oro that women's role as wife should be dutiful and dedicated. The husband is the head and crown on them irrespective of the status and position of women

Man's dishonesty often results to pains and agony in the heart of honest, plain and dutiful wife. The disharmony in the family of Aborode in Igba Oro was caused by the husband leading to struggle among women to make ends needs on their children. It was only Labimpe that single handedly- struggled to bail herself out of barrenness, thereafter bearing children, raising them all along with her step children when her husband Aborode was drinking all the while.

Kolawole (1992) similarly observed that women are always saddled with the task of raising and upbringing children. These male authors seem to appeal to women that no amount of pains, agony and suffering that might be inflicted on them by the husbands must be overlooked by the wife, whenever the husband asks for forgiveness years after. Aborode later begged her good wife for forgiveness after the wicked ones have been exposed.

Women are always at the receiving end in the polygamous home. There is no woman that can stop her husband from marrying another wife, otherwise, such wife will be sent out. Thus, it shows that the turbulent nature of polygamous home is the root cause of gargantuan envy that often occurs among women.

Owolabi (2001) in Igba Oro portrays that there is peace in a polygamous family. Both the wives and husband are envious of one another. Envy is common to both men and women, it has no monopoly. In Eru O bodo, neighbours refused to support Baba Folake to fight Bayo on the impregnated daughter becomes Folake's father is lazy and courteous. The novel reveals that the author affirmed men's oppressive tendency over womenfolk in the society shown in the way in which Bayo has been oppressing the down trodden masses and cheating housewives without considering their plight. In his own right, the author supported women in his condemnation of men's

attitude towards women by cheating their wives, fornicating with young ladies and destroying their lives. This is part of men's oppressive disposition on women.

Feminism makes us to understand that it is the culture of the society that necessitates the ignominious appreciation of the womenfolk in the marital circle. Particularly, among the rich, the elite and those in power, they have turned women to coverlet and facilities for men's enjoyment. However, the authors of the novels revealed that men are actually oppressing women and more importantly, the societal culture equally supports the denial of women their fundamental human rights. The author did not mention or reckon with the contemporary time. He also failed to acknowledge that presently, women are equally occupying positions of trust with high responsibility throughout the African continent. Their failure to acknowledge this does not promote the course of women, their success and development.

In essence, women characters in these novels are portrayed in a realistic manner rather than fiction. It is not a fiction that woman characters are amorous; they are fond of engaging themselves in amorous affairs with men, most especially, when there is money and material wealth. Some women are also fond of being envious and wicked; they can kill and destroy in order to please themselves while many are women of dignity and honour in our society.

Conclusion

The three novels explored the realities of our environment in our daily life affairs as it affects the women folk. Women are the bridge builder; the builder of home and the society, without them, the life in the society is not complete. This is so because we have to procreate as nature demands and as well in line with our cultural preservations. Much as bad and undisciplined, as women are being portrayed by the authors, still, the society cannot do without them. It is only in togetherness that a virile and steadfast society can be built; hence, what we need is to correct, re-dedicate and re-shape our focus to make the society a better and worthy place to live. A decent and disciplined society is clearly an abode of peace, progress and unity.

This study observed that our society is corrupt and crippled by the desire for material wealth and money influence. This has made us to relegate discipline

to the background and simultaneously, jettisoned decency, caution and decorum. So far, the writers show in their themes, plot, characterization and language use that women are enormously inclined to material wealth and lust for money. Women's decisions or choices are largely influenced by money. *Fila l'obinrin* shows that material wealth influences women's decision in choosing a husband. So also, money influences and entices women to engage themselves in amorous affairs and becoming promiscuous as it was shown in *Eru O b'odo*. While *Igba Oro* clearly pictures the height and extent of envy, wickedness and destruction tendencies in women's character most especially, when they have competitors.

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