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From Subversive Othering to Utopian Imagining: Gendered Vision and Revision in Vincent Egbuson's *Womandela*

Adebiyi-Adelabu, Kazeem

Department of English

University of Ibadan, Ibadan

Oyo State, Nigeria

E-mail: ak.adebiyi@ui.edu.ng; aka.adebiyi@gmail.com

Abstract

The article examined the representation of the African woman in a twenty-first century Nigerian novel, Vincent Egbuson's *Womandela*. Critical attention is shifted from the popular feminist reading of African literature which privileges areas of immediate discomfort for the African woman, that is, domestic/marital, cultural and economic issues. My critical lens focused on the issue of political empowerment of the African woman. The article acknowledged the fact that African women in pre-colonial era enjoyed great political power in varying degrees in different communities, it then proceeded to analyse how Egbuson subverts the contemporary political emasculation of the African woman by drawing on the legend of the late South African President, Nelson Mandela to produce an African female political amazon. The analysis revealed the use of *Othering*, syntactic deconstruction of some nominals and pronominals, myth reversal and onomastic neologism as strategies of relocating African women from the margin to the centre, specifically to the political centre.

Key words: Other, Othering, the African woman, Vincent Egbuson, *Womandela*, Subversion

Introduction

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Until the conscious intervention of women writers and feminist critics, representations of the African woman in African literature were generally and patently infelicitous. This is seen in such works as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road*. Whether this was wilful or inadvertent should be a good object of another scholarly inquiry. Early African women writers such as Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Aminata Sow Fall, Ama Ata Aidoo and critics such as Molar Ogundipe-Leslie, Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Mary Kolawole were some of the interventionists in this regard. Whether consciously or inadvertently, a number of early African men writers, to be sure, also offered felicitous representations of women in their writings. Ngugi wa Thiongo, Nuruddin Farah and Sembene Ousmane readily come to mind. From the 1980s upward, there has however been what comes across as a conscious and steady mutation in the characterization of women in African literature from the balanced and objective to the partial and patronizing, and further to the radical and revolutionary by both men and women writers. Yet, in most of the attempts at correcting the negative portrayal of the African woman in African writings, women writers have, unsurprisingly, been the ones at pains to do so. More importantly, since the emergence of new creative interventions to challenge or redress the apparent imbalance in gender politics on the African literary landscape, attention has been understandably focused on the areas of immediate discomfort for the African woman, which are the domestic, the cultural, and the economic; to the neglect of the political. While the domestic, the cultural and the economic suggested here are, indisputably imbricated by politics, the political is conceptualized in this essay in terms of governance or political leadership. Notwithstanding many attempts at relocating women from the margin to the centre, they have hardly enjoyed real "centredness" in African literature, politically speaking. In the essay at hand, this "centredness" in the political sense is the focus.

In an essay originally published in 1998 but re-published in a 2007 anthology of criticism and theory on African Literature, Flora Nwapa, a pioneer African woman writer, raises critics' concern about African women writers' obsession with patriarchal issues in their works. According to her, one of the concerned critics at a conference where the paper in question was first presented had challenged women writers to "project into the future the figure of a female president" since "fiction may lead to fact" (2007, p. 531). Nwapa not only agrees to the idea, she notes that it is lofty and possible, especially given the fact that "various African governments are using women as resources in nation building" (2007, p. 531). Interestingly, she also observes that this noble task should be a charge of both female and male writers. The nameless critic's remark, apparently made before 1998, appears unheeded by Nigerian women writers. From early writers like Nwapa herself and Buchi Emecheta to contemporary ones such as Chimamanda Adichie, Sefi Atta, Abimbola Adelakun, Chika Unigwe and so on,

excessive preoccupation with gender issues is still pervasive. These contemporary writers, especially those in the diaspora or those shuttling between the natal and diasporic homes are, however, taking on larger issues beyond gender. Perhaps it is more important to note that the remark by the critic Nwapa alluded to was clearly a call for a more intense imaginative power and prophetic vision on the part of African female writers, a need extendable to contemporary African male writers as well.

Several years after the above observation was made, no African female writer appears to have taken up this challenge. Vincent Egbuson's *Womandela*, published to literary acclaim in Nigeria in 2006 seems to be the first intervention in this respect. *Womandela* not only envisions an Africa where women hold sway politically, it also ruptures a number of assumptions and stereotypes about the sexes. Early critical opinions in Nigerian and, by extension, African literary scholarship voice the subjugation of the female in terms of domestic and marital subordinations, economic dependence, cultural taboos and a myriad of cultural restrictions. Examples of this are seen in some of the essays of gender-conscious Nigerian critics, some of which include Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Chioma Opara, Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Taiwo Oladele. Persistent preoccupation with these issues tends to give the impression that women in Nigeria, and perhaps Africa, are powerless. Oral tradition has it that women in traditional Nigerian society were not only politically relevant, they actually occupied significant political positions as leaders of their communities. For instance, oral tradition from the North-west of Nigeria has it that women, called Magajiya, used to be political heads in their communities. A surviving and popular legend in this regard is that of Queen Amina of Zazzau in the present-day Kaduna State, Nigeria. Also, in the South-west of Nigeria, there are oral traditions that credit the founding of villages, communities and towns to women, with such women being the political heads of the geographical entities concerned. A good example is a town called Ondo. The town is said to have been founded by a woman named Pupupu who doubled as the political head of her community. This has been well documented by Mary Kolawole (1997). While woman political leadership of the town still subsists in Pupupu's lineage, the modern order (the impact of British Colonial Indirect Rule which privileged and recognized male monarchs) has transferred traditional leadership of the town to Osemawe (a male monarch). However, the female monarch from Pupupu's lineage, now bearing the title Lobun, is still very much recognized in traditional circles in the town, with a full complement of female chiefs in council. Kolawole also notes some remarkable women political leaders from other parts of the continent in persons of Kahina of the Maghreb in North Africa who ruled between 575 and 702A.D, as well as Queen Candace of Meroe-Ethiopia who ruled in the second and third centuries. These examples show that women in traditional African societies were politically consequential.

Similarly, Cheikh Anta Diop (1987) drew attention to the political might and relevance of women in traditional African society in his comparative examination of the political

and social systems of Europe and sub-Saharan Africa. He highlighted the legislative orientation in pre-colonial Black Africa as bicameral, where women wielded as much, if not greater power than men in the legislative assemblies that were divided along sex lines. Despite all of these, the representation of women in African literature has not been elevating, politically speaking. Often, their political subjugation is often blamed on Western colonialism or Arab/Islamic influence. Perhaps in consequence of its enduring impact on the post-colony, Western colonialism appears to be the more deemed guilty in the “crime” of “disempowering”, or Othering of the African woman. This has incited a sustained critical interest that negotiates a parallel relation between the postcolony and women.

Otherness/Othering and the Woman in Postcolonial Discourse

Thus, the intersection between postcolonial studies and feminist literary scholarship has occasioned numerous critical commentaries on the Otherness of the African woman in particular. This is not surprising as both deal directly or indirectly with issues of oppression and exploitation in different ways, the gravest being that of cultural and mental inferiorisation. This inferiorisation aspect of colonial or neo-colonial realities thrives on Othering or the engendering of Otherness, a process Edward Said (1978) has eloquently intimated us is a strategy of self-definition which involves the practice of conceiving a “contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (2) in order to crystallise our own notion of Self. Theorists such as Homi Bhabha (1995), Abdul JanMohamed (1995), and Gayatri Spivak (1995) also generally described it as a practice of projecting the qualities we resent about ourselves unto another person or group in order to consolidate our self-perception and identity in felicitous terms.

Appropriating the notion in their postcolonial theorisation, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1989, 1995) have noted the way women are likened to colonized subjects. The colonised subject is Othered, and exploited in many ways. However, postcolonial feminists insist that the woman is a greater victim of Othering, exploitation and oppression in colonial and post-colonial situations. This is aptly articulated by Julianah Nfah-Abbenyi when she observes that “The process that defines African women as Other can be read at multiple levels. They are the Other of man, the Other of Western woman, sometimes the Other of African-American and other diaspora women. Finally, there exist other politics of difference within any given African context” (1997, p. 108). This observation clearly highlights the complicated plight from which African women struggle to escape. They suffer multiple yokes of oppression in the hands of different Selves in different contexts and, perhaps, at different times, or even simultaneously. Yet the multiple level from which Nfah-Abbenyi reads the plight of the African woman is however partial and incomplete. Apparently informed by her own victim experience as an African woman in diaspora, she chooses to centralise race, in addition to gender, while leaving out class in her Otherness

equation. Could this be due to her own relatively privileged socio-economic class as an intellectual in an American University? To also suggest that women are usually Othered “within any given African context” is a bit too sweeping. In some instances, men are also marginalised or Othered in certain contexts in Africa, especially in ritual and spiritual contexts. For instance, in the Gelede masquerade cult among a section of the Yoruba in Southwest Nigeria, to which this writer belongs, and parts of the Republic of Benin, women are not only centred, power distribution is to their advantage.

In postcolonial feminist studies, it has been noted that, as Other, women are not only oppressed, their voices are not often allowed to be heard (Spivak, 1995) or heard only in indirect ways (Bhabha, 1995). Similarly, Rajeswari Rajan and You-me Park have noted the significance of the interface between postcolonial and feminist studies, especially in terms of the parallel relation in the area of the “subject” Other and the “female”. However, they identify the issues of class, nationality, religion and sexualities as intersecting with gender, while also believing that all these have implications for women’s lives in terms of their “subjectivities, work, sexuality, and rights” (2005:53). In other words, they imply that these issues also participate in the Othering of women. However, they fail to account for the significance of these issues where only women are concerned. For instance, does Othering take place among women of the same class, religion, or of same sexual orientation? And, how does it happen or manifest if it does? This signifies some complexity in the matter, as noted in respect of Nfah-Abbenyi’s view.

Appropriating the concept of Otherness in one of her feminist criticisms, Okafor (2002) described it as a “theory of objectification of women in the social, political and cultural life in terms of their marginalization and construction as inferior reflections of the standard which is male: woman as man’s inferior Other” (p. 260). Like the previous, and many other critics, Okafor’s grasp and application of the concept is unfortunately limited by binarism, which sees the relationship between Self and Other in absolute terms, such as male-female and oppressor-oppressed. In a shared approach by Kehinde (2006, p. 108) and Al-Saidi (2014, p. 96) binarism is similarly understood and deployed in absolute terms to explicate social and power relations between the centre and the margin (or Self and Other) in the following ways: “Us” and “them”, “First world” and “third world”, “White” and black”, “Colonizer” and “colonized” “Powerful” and “powerless”, “Torturer” and “tortured”, “Master” and “slave” and so on. In alignment with previous views, Kehinde’s and Al-Saidi’s shared view is insufficiently problematised. Unlike theirs, Sara Suleri (1992) advocated a nuanced approach which appears to be more useful in engaging critical undertakings of this kind. She cautions against plain notions of alterity that construct Otherness as a simple centre/margin binary. She also points out the need not to ignore specific historical realities, as well as the fact that women of the so-called Third World do not necessarily have shared

experience with their counterparts in the West. In other words, she conceives Otherness as neither fixed in any entity nor as a fixed entity itself; it fluctuates, as it is influenced by the values that obtain in given historical and cultural milieus. Also, speaking about the plight and subjectivity of women in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the place from which Egbuson, the novelist under examination, comes, Charles Feghabo (2014) observed that “within the superior *Self*, there exists the inferior *Other*” (p. 316). Consequently, one may also conjecture that there exists within the inferior *Other*, a superior *Self* or a doubly inferior *Other*. It all depends on specific spatial and temporal contexts. While these views, to which I subscribe, align with Suleri’s on the need to avoid an unproblematised notion of alterity as a binary construct between the polarities of the centre and the margin, the article at hand reads Egbuson’s *Womandela* as a fictional work that insists on absolute binarism between gender roles of men and women in terms of political astuteness and delivery, but in a way that destabilises the traditional construction of same. Thus, the aim of this article is to demonstrate how the African woman is politically imaged through a subversion of gender Othering praxis in writings from the post-colony, using a twenty-first century Nigerian novel.

As noted earlier, women have always been conceived and treated as the *Other* of the male *Self* in postcolonial discourse. While this orientation is still prevalent in African literature, a lot of efforts to resist the trend have been mounted through several counter-hegemonic fictional narratives, pseudo-autobiographical works, agitprop plays and threnodic feminist verses. To say that women are at the forefront of this resistance is to re-state not only the obvious but the factual. The novel examined in this paper falls within the category referred to above as feminist and counter-hegemonic. It counters many of the assumptions about gender in the African context. Unlike many of such texts, however, it is written by a man.

Imagining an African Political Amazon

The novel, *Womandela*, revolves around the leadership qualities and exploits of the eponymous heroine, who not only leads her people admirably but emerges as a strong and indomitable power broker in Namuh, the fictional setting of the novel. Hitherto, feminist-conscious writings by Nigerian women have focused almost too repetitively on issues such as oppression of women in marriage, childlessness, unhealthy and harmful cultural practices forced on women and women economic dependence on men. Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Emecheta’s *Joys of Motherhood* are classic examples of this. Some of them go a step further to celebrate the “small victories” achieved by their message-bearers and heroines. They are “small victories” because they are often personal and with limited implication for the good of women as a group or in general. In *Womandela*, the position and actions of the heroine do not only impact on women as a group but also on the group to which women supposedly stand in relation as the *Other*, which is the male *Self*. It is particularly interesting that contemporary Nigerian women writers

have abandoned the tradition of the pioneers. In fact, some of them revise while others subvert the tradition. Writers such as Chimamanda Adichie, Sefi Atta, Abimbola Adelokun are a few examples in this connection.

Womandela assumed the leadership of her country, Namuh, after a period of political instability and gloom. A military dictator, General Jeff Guna, had annulled an election she was poised to win. A group of patriotic military officers later toppled the dictator and invited her to form a government. Womandela declined the offer and asks that another election be organized, which she eventually won. Although some of her women friends contribute in different ways to mobilise support from among their folks for Womandela, the crucial and strategic supports came from the male members of her political party, especially Chief Ngura, the Chairman, and Sama Affra, her former presidential running mate.

In a typical African political landscape, women are not just marginalised, they are used by male politicians as cheer groups at campaign rallies. They sing, dance and clap the leaders, usually men, who give the speeches. The few privileged women, usually the very assertive, bold and often educated ones, are given occasional opportunities to play leading roles. However, in most cases when leading roles are given to them, it is usually as women leaders. Curiously enough, there are never men leaders. In *Womandela*, these realities are refracted. At the party level, the leaders, who are men, fall over one another to ensure Womandela's victory at the polls. At campaign rallies, if Womandela does not speak, it is either Imasat, her lady friend, or any other of her women associates. In the other different presidential campaign rallies witnessed in the novel, which include that of Sama Affra, a male presidential candidate, as well as that of Yamara Koba, another female presidential candidate, both of the same One Namuh Party, it is Womandela, Imasat or some other female party leader that addresses the crowd of party supporters. The women occupy the centre while the men are placed on the margins.

Imagining an African political amazon through the fictional world of *Womandela*, the novelist casts the eponymous heroine, a leader in an African state, against type. In this heroine, we see a leader with a keen sense of purpose and direction; tolerant, industrious, honest and frugal to mention a few leadership traits. This, surely, contrasts with what is often associated with many historical and contemporary African male leaders. Though neither cut as a saint nor as an angel, she offers an excellent and admirable leadership to the people of Namuh, the imaginary setting of the narrative. She displays a rare combination of political astuteness, organizational savvy and intellectual prowess; all tempered with an unusual humanity. When interrogating political leadership in Africa, especially with reference to its ineptitude, what emerge as the recurring decimal includes corruption, nepotism, wastefulness, "sit-tightism", intolerance of criticism and opposition, as well as human rights abuse. Womandela virtually falsifies this. Her conception by the novelist almost borders on the fantastic,

yet her talk and walk lend credence to the believability of her personality and achievements. From the outset, she defines her mission in government, which is to use love to bring about positive changes in the lives of Namuhs. With this definition of purpose, she swings into action by appointing competent hands to help in the attainment of her goals.

In the fanciful country called Namuh under Womandela, nepotism has no place. Her choice of appointees is based on merit. Even though political expediency tempers the choice in some cases, she does not allow primitive and parochial tribal or ethnic loyalty to sway her from taking decisions in the interest of the people. She flatly refuses imposition of candidates for appointment on her when they are not suitable. Even the Press that is wont to be very critical of government applauds her choices in political appointments. When any of her appointees misbehaves, they are given the boots. A veritable example is the Internal Affairs Minister who prefers to have his children born as British citizens instead of Namuh's. Another is the Minister of Education whose ministry oversees the construction of ridiculous structures as classrooms for students. These are clearly scarce initiatives and measures in corridors of power in Africa.

Of the evils plaguing political leadership across Africa over the years, the syndrome of self-perpetuation or self-succession, otherwise called "sit-tightism", has been very fatal. Womandela makes a reversal of this trend. Right from the electioneering period, she makes her wish of single-term tenure a campaign issue:

The people today have outlawed sit-tightism in Namuh! I shall serve the people for only one term! No tightism! I am the people's word! Because of this day, I shall not glue myself to the office forever- I shall leave State House, physically, emotionally and mentally, when my time is due. I shall serve you humbly, I shall give you good governance, 24/7 you will be uppermost in my mind (p. 18)

At the end of five years in power, she walks her talks and quits the office. In most African countries, leaders always have their eyes on more than one term. Quite justifiably too since most of the countries' constitutions make provision for two terms of four or five years each, as the case may be. However, it has become fashionable to tinker with the constitution so as to facilitate a third, fourth or unlimited term arrangement. This has happened in countries like Gabon, Malawi, Chad, and Cameroon for example. It was attempted in Nigeria in 2007 but it failed. There has also been "militocratic" transmutations as witnessed in leaders like J.J. Rawlings of Ghana, Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia and Samuel Doe of Liberia to mention a few. For most of these leaders, it is the people who "beg" them to continue with their "good work". Egbuson's conception of his protagonist thus appears to belong in Thomas Moore's cosmos. The truth probably is that sycophants inundate the corridors of power so much that an unsuspecting, flattery-eager or vain-glorious leader would easily fall prey to

their designs. And, this is where Womandela distinguishes herself and, by implication, African womenfolk. Not only does she resist the urgings and pressures mounted by sycophants like Imasat, a doggish loyalist, confidant and political strategist, she also resists the temptation and abuse offered by the allure of power. She seems to think that “a woman’s word is her honour”. Much as this conception appears to be one out of this world in the African context, late President Mandela of South Africa actually lived it.

A critical political challenge in Africa is intolerance of criticism and organized opposition. Words or expressions like subversive elements, rebels, dissidents, saboteurs, disgruntled elements, anarchists, communists, fundamentalists and terrorists characterize the political lexicon of most African male leaders. And, like arrows, they are darted at critics and opposition figures in good measures. State security apparatus is often deployed to hunt down ‘dissidents’ working against the “national interest”. Several jail houses and detention camps dot most national landscapes, with pressmen, presswomen and social activists being their tenants from time to time. While holding sway as the President of Namuh, Womandela’s tolerance of opposition almost borders on indulgence. In fact, she encourages it in the belief that it will keep her government on its toes. While instructing Bama Muthezi who eventually becomes her Education Minister to write her inaugural speech as President to the nation, she would prefer a speech that is “not condemning the people on the other side of the struggle because they too were guided by their own lights” (p. 91). On another occasion, when reacting to the Association of Namuh Writers’ unsparing criticism of her government even while they are soliciting her favor, she is not moved to anger. Instead, she calmly and nobly remarks that “their hasty criticism of a government that was not yet a year old showed their love for their motherland and their urgent desire for her growth and progress” (p. 284). Not only this, she also prefers to watch the TV stations that tend to be very critical of her government. In the real African states where men hold sway, the inclination would have been towards a proscription of such media houses or the intimidation of their personnel.

Womandela’s political leadership is characterized by uncommon proclivity for empathy, kind-heartedness and a general feeling of the human touch. Her predisposition to forgive is unusually great. She does not only forgive her adversaries and foes, she shows understanding and love to them. Her interpersonal relations with those that are as highly-placed as Cabinet members or as lowly-placed as messenger and cleaners in the State House are exemplary. When in the wrong, she does not feel too proud to admit it and apologize. In instances of injustice, violence and oppression, she always wonders: “Where is love?” Womandela’s sensitivity to the motions of the construct called conscience would stand her out in any assembly of leaders. When she is confronted with the realities of the behind the scene shenanigans leading to her electoral victory, the prick of the conscience she experiences foregrounds the tenderness and purity of her heart. Even when she has to take money from the state

security vote to support her friend and political strategist, Imasat, she is slightly uncomfortable. While all these may give her away as a conscientious leader, it is still wondrous if these are the stuff real political leaders are made of.

Egbuson's imagination in the conception of Womandela is quite wild. Though connected, it is not limited to the political leadership qualities of Womandela already highlighted. He extends it to the realm of sport, specifically to soccer where Womandela takes a revolutionary decision. The national soccer team of Namuh had won a match against Cameroon in a tournament organized by Confederation of African Football (CAF) through a controversial decision. Womandela's government refuses to accept the victory of her country's team and requests the football federation to organize a replay in a neutral country. After much pressure, the federation schedules a replay in Ghana where Cameroon wins and the Namuh team return the trophy earlier awarded, on a referee's error of judgment, to the Cameroonian team.

Taking stock of her performance in office, Womandela observed:

The primary duty of the CEO in Mosaic Building is to fit together the different elements in Namuh society, but there seems to be no togetherness after four years of my presidency.... Namuh is not yet the country of love I thought to make it. My fellow Namuhs, please forgive my failure (Egbuson, p. 335).

This humble remark, made after her exit from power, makes her image soar at the expense of the successor she had helped to install. Perhaps meaning to say that women are better leaders, Egbuson presented the reader with a male successor who is a contrast to Womandela. The successor, Affra, is cast as an archetype African leader. Within his rather short tenure, he exhibits virtually all those unhealthy attributes with which many African leaders can be identified, viz.: intolerance of opposition, extravagance, corruption, paranoia, violence, insincerity, lack of tact, insensitivity and so on. Having a male successor with these attributes could have been sheer accident. However, the man's successor, Yamara Koba, who is his widow, is cast in the mould of former President Womandela, bolstering the view that we are dealing with a novelist whose gender agenda is patently partial and feminist. While this characterization tentatively betrays his subversive ideology, it is further reinforced by the way he casts many of the significant male characters in the novel. Dela, Womandela's estranged husband is such a "ridiculously shy" man that Womandela had to chase her, reversing a popular myth in Africa. He pulled out of their marriage because he could not stand the attention the office of his wife as a President would attract to him. He lacks the courage to even tell of his fear, secretly disappears from home and tries to cut possible links to his whereabouts. These, in addition to Womandela's appropriation of his name, effectively, dissolve his identity and personhood.

Gender and Linguistic Subversions

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A number of significant male characters are strategically used to subvert patriarchal hegemony in the novel. These include Bama Muthezi, Womandela's Education Minister; Pastor Baraka, her erstwhile admirer; and, Chief Ngura, her party Chairman. For instance, Muthezi, in spite of his high intellect and newly acquired privileged status as a Cabinet member, is cast as a failed husband and a hen-pecked lover who has to worship a prostitute for sex and emotional balance. His intellect, confidence and emotional intelligence attract query as Kalisa, a wife he dotes on, walks out and back into his life capriciously as she gets into elopement affair with another man, just the same way Muniya, her prostitute partner, dumps him. Muthezi is also manipulated into pleasure-giving sex object by Womandela after the latter learns of his prostitute-partner's desertion. With the foregoing characterization of Womandela and the barely venerated *Othering* of men in the novel, women are effectively 'centred' in the political sense, with men subtly and blatantly 'decentred'.

The couple, Yamara Koba and Sama Affra, are two other major characters used in the novel to subvert the binary relation of Self and Other. They are central to the thematic issue of political leadership in the narrative as both ruled over Namuh as president at different times, the former succeeding the latter. As husband and wife, they live a stormy life, due largely to the infidelity of the husband and the wife's unshaken loyalty to their benefactor, Womandela. However, after bearing the heat for some time, Yamara turns violent, both verbally and physically. This follows an allegation of the use of juju (African magic) by the husband against his wife. In response, she rains imprecations on him and beats him up. Instead of returning her violence, he goes down on his knees to beg her. Here, we have a wife beating up not just her husband, but one who is also a president of a country. This is a clear reversal of the typical in early modern African literature in particular and life in most African societies in general. Early in the novel, Yamara is reported by her mother to have slapped her brother on a certain occasion in the past, a thing the old woman considers unthinkable. However, on a recall of the incident, one of Yamara's friends' wonders, "What is so unforgivably bad if a woman slaps a man?" (p. 74). The friend even exhorts Yamara to fight for the womenfolk. By the remark and the encouragement, Egbuson further disrupts conventional postcolonial thinking about African women.

Also, central to the discourse of Otherness is language, which is seen as a tool for inciting and inflicting subaltern mentality by the centred Self on the marginal Other. Conceiving the latter inferior, the former deploys linguistic resources which denigrate the latter, the Other, and simultaneously provides the *Self* with a reversed image of the Other. This confirms Michel Foucault's (2002) argument that whoever controls the official use of language in a society ultimately controls social and political power. Language is not only instrumental in the construction of thoughts and ideas; it is a very powerful tool in the process of doing so. It is also a great tool in the in the distribution of power. As a cultural artefact, it has a great influence in the survival or otherwise of

a given culture or ideology. Its potentials in these respects, perhaps, inform gender activists', especially feminists', resolve to centralize the issue of language in their quest for gender balancing. This is probably why, in contemporary usage, neuter or genderless singular "they" is encouraged in pronominal references in the English language.

In Egbuson's *Womandela* (2006), this new trend is not followed. The novelist simply deconstructs a syntactic convention in the use of pronominals referring to the two sexes. In a radical move, he abandons the phallogocentric ordering of personal pronoun such as *him* or *her*, *he* or *she* and substitute them with *her* or *him* and *she* or *he* respectively. Perhaps, he considers the idea of a singular or plural "they", encouraged by feminists, a bit too apologetic. Also, in nominal referents, the female sex is privileged in syntactic ordering. For instance, we are told of how *Womandela* speaks of "wreaths for the dead heroines and heroes of the struggle" (p. 87) or where she reflects on how a person could have been a follower for several lifetimes only to later become "a leader, a queen, a king, or a mover of women and men" (p. 73). By this deliberate re-ordering, the novelist deconstructs not only the traditional practice of using masculinist-hegemonic *he* and *him* for both sexes, he also stands the logic of *he* or *she*, *him* or *her* and even *s/he* on its head. He moves the hitherto occupier of the margins to the centre and vice versa. In another radical instance of utopian imagining, God is conceived as a woman. In pronominal references to God, *She* and *Her* are the novelist's preferences.

Egbuson's (2006) linguistic innovation and feminist activism is not limited to syntactic privileging, it extended to onomastic inventiveness. In the last two decades or thereabouts, the name Mandela has not only become synonymous with exemplary and purposeful leadership in Africa and the world over, it is also seen as a benchmark by which other African leaders are now assessed. The possession of superlative leadership qualities by the legendary Nelson Mandela must have taken years of deliberate sacrifice, self-discipline and training. That the late statesman's last name begins with the syllable "man" is, however, sheer coincidence. In Egbuson's novel, however, the possessor of 'Mandelaic' leadership qualities is a woman. Grafting the woman's real name, Woma, on her husband's name, Dela, the novelist offers us *Womandela*, the eponymous heroine of the novel. Certainly, the late Nelson Mandela's legendary status does not derive from his longsuffering spirit as a twenty-seven-year victim of political prison sentence, but from his integrity, selflessness, forgiving spirit, and other leadership attributes as a political activist, prisoner and President. These qualities are amply invested in Egbuson's heroine. Thus, one sees the legend of Mandela as inspiring the story of *Womandela*. While Egbuson has given us a female Mandela in his epic novel, finally taking up the challenge by the critic alluded to in the beginning of the article, it is yet to be seen the extent to which his vision would materialise. Already, Africa has produced an elected female president in Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and

a couple of appointed Prime Ministers in countries such as Senegal, Central African Republic, Mali, Rwanda and Sao Tome and Principe.

Through this onomastic invention as well as the leadership attributes invested in the woman, the novelist demonstrates a fertile imagination, which is interesting because in the fading patriarchal order, the person from whom the second half of the name is derived occupies the centre. Now, he belongs to the periphery. With the metaphorical dissolution of his identity and his physical disappearance, Dela, embraces a marginal space while surrendering the centre to the supposed Other. It is also interesting to note that while women gender activists/critics seem more interested in balancing the scale, the dissolution of Dela's identity, by its metaphorical import, suggests a vision of an order where only women would be in charge politically, thereby Othering their male counterparts in this respect.

Another example of Egbuson's onomastic inventiveness is seen in the naming of the fictional setting of his story, which is Namuh. As noted in an authorial intrusion in the novel, when the letters in the word are reversed, we have "Human". This suggests that the novelist may well have the entire humanity, not just Africa or Nigeria, in mind while crafting his story. To that extent, one may say he is making a case for women in general. The fact that references are made mostly to Nigeria and a few other African countries, and not to people other than blacks weakens this possibility.

Conclusion

If the qualities with which Womandela is invested in the novel appear very idealistic and romantic, this is because most of the political leaders the African continent has produced have been or very close to the direct opposite of what Egbuson (2006) envisioned in this novel, which is why his imagination may seem utopian. Yet, it is realistic. Nothing Womandela does in the novel is superhuman. She is only a super woman. In *Womandela*, the African woman is moved from the margin to the centre. The novelist deconstructs the identity of the African woman in the political sense. He has also done so linguistically. A critical look at the apparently new identity of the African woman depicted in the novel and the implications of all that attends it include the fact that her social and economic standings patently soar. Secondly, and more importantly, the woman is also at the centre of political process, where decisions that impact her life are taken. Thus, her dignity as a consequential partner in human affairs is not only restored, it is placed in a most effective context, the political.

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