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**Changing the Concept of Womanhood: Male Feminists and the
Nigeria Feminist Novel**

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Abstract

The Nigeria feminist novel has experienced a remarkable growth in recent years. In spite of the negative portrayal of female characters in the works authored by male novelists, female writers have shown a commitment to portraying and revealing the subjugating plight of women in patriarchal societies and the positive contributions that they make to the development of their society in their works. Nonetheless, in recent years, male authors are beginning to showcase their feminist inclinations by creating awareness and sensitising their readers on the need to ensure that the woman is liberated from patriarchal subjugation and oppression. This paper discussed some of the works of some of male novelists such as Abubakar Gimba, Tanure Ojaide and Felix Ogoanah and the conscious effort made towards promoting a positive portrayal of women in male authored texts. The study concluded that these male feminists have shown that the woman can only be emancipated when men join hands with the women to ensure that all forms of discrimination and oppression are eliminated which will in turn engender peace and development in the society.

Key Word: Nigeria feminist novel, patriarchal subjugation,

Introduction

Nigerian female writers have, over the years, portrayed the subjugating plight of women in society with a view to addressing the distorted and biased representations of women in the fictional works of Nigerian male writers. Due to the history of Nigeria – pre-colonial to post-colonial era- male writers have been concerned with addressing the prevailing societal issues and women’s issues were given little attention. In the literary works where female characters are portrayed, they are assigned demeaning roles and depicted as voiceless people whose sole importance is to massage the male ego. Femi Osofisan posited that ‘the bulk of our literature is secretly a weapon of male propaganda, of an agenda to keep the female under perpetual dominance.’ (p. 4) Femi Ojoade noted that Nigerian ‘literature is a male created and male dominated chauvinist art’ (p. 25) and Chikwenye Ogunyemi charged Nigerian literature of being ‘phallic dominated with male writers and critics dealing almost exclusively with male characters and concerns naturally aimed at a predominantly male audience’.

The Nigeria literary scene has experienced an increase in the publication of novels by male authors in the period for this study. However, there is no evidence of strong female characters; rather they are given peripheral roles. In Okri’s masterpiece trilogy, *The Famished Road* (1991), *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998), the patriarch of the family decides the family’s daily actions and holds the power to influence their thoughts. The male character is not only the central exponent but also the antagonist who dominates other people. Daughters are often depicted as commodities rather than persons, taken under the father’s authoritative wing until the time comes to pass on that responsibility to their husbands. Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) is set in Lagos in the context of military dictatorship with the story narrated by a socially conscious journalist who abandons his studies at the university when his roommate succumbs to acute psychotic depression. Habila’s *Measuring Time* (2006) is set in Keti, a small community located in North Eastern part of the country. The story revolved around Mamo, the protagonist. In these works, the female characters are not fully developed; rather they are depicted as appendages to the men. According to Nnolim, ‘Right from the Edenic myth to modern times, women have been depicted as angels with feet of clay, as purveyors of unhappiness, both for themselves and for their male counterparts. The image of women in African literature is a gloomy one, compounded by the unhelpful hand of tradition and patriarchy.’ (p. 165) ‘The motivational force of most Nigerian female writers is the creation of biased images of womanhood in the writing of most male writers. To deconstruct certain distortions of womanhood, the women writers create central women characters in their works that are free from men’s subjugation.’ (Sylvester-Molemodile & Mba, p. 111). However, since the advent of the feminist movement and the increasing awareness of women about their rights and the power of the pen in addressing issues that are peculiar to women, there has been a stiff opposition from members of the society, especially the male folk.

The women that identify with the feminist movement are regarded as disgruntled and frustrated women that have decided to embrace western culture in order to have an avenue to vent their frustrations.

Interestingly, in recent years, there has been a remarkable change, awareness and recognition in the Nigerian society in the perception of feminism thereby leading to an increased consciousness of the plight of women and the need to improve their lot in patriarchal societies. The issues that are peculiar to women such as spousal abuse, violence against women, unwholesome widowhood practices, and discrimination against women have been of major concern to legislators, Non-governmental organisations and women's societies. The sensitisation of the public on the oppression of women and the need to protect their rights have led to a renewed interest of the male folk in championing the cause of women and exploring ways of liberating women from the shackles of tradition, culture and societal norms that tend to inhibit the emancipation of women. Although such men in Nigerian parlance are called 'woman wrapper', they have realised the need to protect women's interest and ensure gender equity, fair play and justice. In essence, men are beginning to realise the need for a positive attitudinal change towards women's issues and the positive role that women can play towards the development of society. The actions of these men aligned with Hooks' definition of feminism as 'a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression' (viii). Kannen averred that his definition 'accounts for the possibility of feminist men, as women alone cannot end societal oppressions' (n. p). Sylvester-Molemodile & Mba agreed that:

Even various well-meaning males realise the necessity of empowering women, exercising free exploration of feminine potentials and its contributions to societal development. Hence, the emergence of male feminist writers is in line with gender struggle, structural modes of modernization and enforcement of renegotiation of respective political and intellectual agenda and recognition for women. (p.108)

Also, Muhammed et al opined that 'feminism is not only by and about women as men too have risen in defence of women (p. 137).

This study discussed the works of some 'male feminist' writers in Nigeria and their contributions to the growth of feminist literature while taking into cognisance their peculiarities and the goals they seek to achieve in their works.

Changing the Concept of Womanhood

The concept of womanhood in patriarchal cultures has always been associated with the perceived feminine virtues of docility, subservience and docility. A woman is meant to exhibit her womanhood as a wife and mother and as such, she should be contented in the domestic sphere with her roles as a child bearer, nurturer and care giver. Any

woman that tries to operate outside the private sphere is perceived to be ambitious and trying to assume roles that are the sole preserve of the man. Many female writers such as, Zaynab Alkali, Tess Onwueme and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo have in their works addressed this gross misrepresentation of women by depicting women characters that have been able to move from the private to public sphere and still succeed in both. Male feminists have also lent their voices in depicting this metamorphosis of women in patriarchal societies. By changing the concept of womanhood, these writers:

... have reconfigured womanhood, prioritising female individualism and empowerment – thereby subverting the seeming powerlessness of women to political authority. By extrapolation, they have upturned the saliency of women transformation of the public sphere through literary production that engages with this reality. The diachronic transformation of ... women, from victims of a society regulated by patriarchal cultural norms and values to independent, political conscious and self-assertive women. (Nwagbara, p. 5)

Abubakar Gimba, in *Sacred Apples* (1994), showcased the qualities of Miriam who serves as a role model to other women. She is intelligent, assertive, independent and a successful career woman in a male dominated profession. She works as a manager in the Songhaian Telecommunications Company Limited and is also an intelligence officer with the rank of an Inspector in the New Tymbuktu Metropolitan Police Department. As a role model, Miriam has:

A job that guaranteed her an enviable independence, while remaining a wife, a good, obedient wife, saving herself the risk most women face as housewives-subservient partners. Independence of mind, and from materiality. Dependence ... is a woman's worst enemy in matrimony, particularly material dependence. (*Sacred Apples*, p.72)

Zahrah realised that she made a fatal mistake in her relationship with Yazid by depending solely on him for her material and financial needs. Her interactions with Miriam exposed her to need to be financially independent, hence her metamorphosis to a self-reliant, hardworking and independent woman that seeks to champion the course of women at the end of the text. Also, Ebi in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006) is intelligent, assertive and exercised her rights as a woman. As an educated woman, she decided not to depend on a man for her livelihood and wanted to be able to fend for her immediate family. Ebi is of the view that:

It is when women are unable to take care of their needs that they go to men they do not even like or marry whatever man they do not love, but believe can provide materially for them. Such women soon discover that material comfort can't make up for love. She then sets herself on the path of self-reliance... she was determined to live independently. (*The Activist* 65).

Ebi eventually earned her doctorate degree and also has a happy marital relationship. Nwagbara posited that:

since patriarchy consigns women to the private sphere – by making them raise children inside the phallic walls of the family as well as makes them do mere housework in the homes and families, there is a need for women to transcend the limiting, chauvinistic walls of the private sphere – by transforming the dynamics of the public sphere through their involvement particularly in political actions (p. 15).

Contrary to the belief that women are timid and vulnerable and are unable to be brave in dangerous situations, Miriam displayed her bravery in rescuing Zahrah three children that are about to be burnt alive by an irate mob. When she told her husband, who is also security personnel the steps to take in rescuing the children, he is pessimistic and is of the view that they risking their lives unduly for children that do not even know. She however prevailed on him and they succeeded in their rescue mission. This singular bold move led to a bond of life-long friendship between her family and Zahrah's.

Male novelists also portray women that are hardworking, resilient and industrious in the face of dire financial constraints. These women maintain their integrity and refuse to indulge in acts that will smear their reputation in their community. This portrayal shows a shift from the earlier portrayal of female characters as people that engage in unwholesome activities and illicit sex in order to survive. Agnes, in Felix Ogoanah's *The Return of Ameze* (2007), hailed from a very poor family and tried to augment her family's income with the meagre earnings from her job. However, her boss, Mr Ehimen, told her to have an illicit sexual affair with Mr. Abdul in order to ensure that his firm secures a major contract. He took advantage of her poor financial background and promised to double her salary if she agrees to the terms. She protects her integrity and refused to be perturbed by the imminent sack and its attendant implications on her family. Agnes tenders her resignation and prefers to face the consequences of her brave decision. Also, Ameze, a young teenager, barely managed to complete her secondary school education. She is saddled with the responsibility of augmenting her family's meagre income. In spite of her family's deteriorating financial situation, she refused to engage in pre-marital sex which is the norm in her community. When her boss promised to double her salary if she agrees to sleep with him or lose her job as an office assistant and housekeeper, she decided to tender her resignation. She refused to be discouraged by the challenges and succumb to self-pity. She takes up petty jobs as load carrier, petty trading and newspaper vendor in order to support her family.

Peace is a very vital aspect of any society. Individuals, families, organisations and governments know its importance and try as much as possible to achieve and maintain it. Male feminists portray the vital role that women play in brokering peace between two parties. These women are peace-builders that try their best towards ensuring that

their families and community benefit from their noble activities. Jibrán and Muhtar, in Abubakar Gimba's *Footprints* (1998), friends from their university days, have a strained relationship which leads to coldness, suspicion and mistrust between them. The men also try to dissuade the members of their family from maintaining the relationship. Muhtar also orchestrates the unlawful arrest and detention of Jibrán as a result of their worsening relationship. Their wives, Naashah and Zynah are uncomfortable with the situation and seek to restore the peaceful atmosphere and cordiality that once existed between the families. They eventually succeed in their quest. Also, Ebi, in *The Activist*, refused to take advantage of a fellow woman's problems and rather, explored ways of restoring peace to a marriage that is at the brink of collapse. When Udoma told her that he wanted to marry a second wife because of his wife's inability to bear children, she explored ways of getting help for the family which yielded the desired results. They are eventually blessed with a baby boy which leads to the restoration of peace in the family. Ojaide in *The Activist* bemoaned the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta community due to the activities of oil companies and its attendant effect on the health of the populace. In a bid to disrupt the unity between the members of the community and stop their agitation for better living conditions, the oil companies in connivance with the Federal Government instigated a deadly communal clash that leaves scores dead, many injured and many properties destroyed. However, the women under the auspices of the Women of the Delta Forum (WODEFOR) led by 'Mrs. Timi Taylor took the initiative to start the reconciliation' (*The Activist* 217). At their meeting, they discuss the immediate and remote causes of the mayhem with a view to forestall a future occurrence. They realise that one of the major causes of the violence is the insatiable greed of the local chiefs, oil companies and the government for the oil wealth. They also discuss the effect of the oil exploration on their health and that of their family members, their inability to get access to good living conditions and the effect of oil spillage on the land and the eco system. Finally, they resolve to use their positions as wives and mothers to bring about a lasting peace between the warring factions. They also decide to 'look for ways to talk to the oil companies to persuade them to arrest the deteriorating environmental situation in the Niger Delta ... and also address the military government about their concerns. (*The Activist* 224) The women are not ignorant of the onerous task since men especially 'soldiers in government did not respect women. They saw women only as sex mates and would be pushed hard for any meaningful discussions.' (*The Activist* 224). The women are hopeful that their efforts will yield positive results. Nevertheless, they decide that if the oil bosses and military chiefs decide to take them for granted, 'They would be surprised at the power that women can wield when driven to the wall. (*The Activist* 224).

Contrary to the generally accepted notion that women are their own worst enemies, the women in the texts for this study united to advance a common cause. Miriam and

Zahrah in *Sacred Apples* form a strong bond of friendship that spans years. Agnes, Ameze and Mrs Aduwa, in *The Return of Ameze*, join forces towards educating girls on the need to live responsibly and the importance of decency and moral uprightness in a morally decadent society. They encouraged the girls to be steadfast and resolute in the face of negative peer pressure and abject poverty.

The prevalence of moral decadence in the society, especially among youths, and the threat it poses to the present and future generation has been one of the concerns of writers. The novelists acknowledged the fact that women no longer uphold the virtues of morality and the need to abstain from pre-marital and extra-marital sex. Nevertheless, the writers depict female characters that are committed to ensuring the sustenance of the virtues of chastity and fidelity. Ameze and Agnes *The Return of Ameze* refused to be coerced into pre-marital sex for financial gains in spite of the pressure from their peers. They choose to be resilient and decent in speech and conduct in order to protect their integrity. Mrs Nancy Ehimen uses her past experience and failures to advise young girls on the need to avoid unwholesome activities in order not to ruin their future. Also, the Activist in *The Activist* is shocked when he discovers that Ebi is still a virgin at the age of thirty-nine in a society that no longer upholds and extols the virtues of chastity. In her relationship with the members of the university community, Ebi conducts herself in a manner worthy of emulation thereby serving as role model to other women.

In Felix Ogoanah's *The Return of Ameze*, the resilience and the ability of women to adapt to difficult situations are exemplified in the character of Mrs Mary Obazee when she lost her husband who is murdered in cold blood. Madam Vee sees Mr Nicholas' NGO as a threat to her dubious activities and she engaged the services of hired assassins. Mrs Obazee overcomes her grief and decides to spearhead the activities of the NGO. Through hard work and determination, she makes remarkable success and is able to achieve her husband's dream of breaking Madam Vee's cartel that engages in human trafficking and child labour. Also, Agnes decides to outsmart the ring of traffickers in Europe when she realises that she has been deceived into prostitution. She resolves not to allow Madam Vee and her cohorts succeed in involving her in such acts. She refuses to accept her fate and bravely escapes to a church. Fortunately, she meets a family that helps her to adapt to her new environment, gets a job and secures admission in a tertiary institution.

By the time Madam Vee discovered her whereabouts three years later, Agnes' moral strength and dedication to the Christian faith were so overwhelming that the cunning old trafficker could not withstand her. She had long finished school and was working with a computer firm (*The Return of Ameze* 275).

These writers proved that there are women that refused to lose hope in a helpless and hopeless situation. Rather, they maximise the little opportunity at their disposal in order to chart a new course for their lives.

Women also make sacrifices in order to ensure and contribute to the success of a noble cause. Naasha in *Footprints* exhibited her selflessness and patriotism in discharging her duties as a trained nurse. She is of the opinion that medical professionals are to help in saving lives and not abdicate their responsibilities in the cause of a labour dispute. She emphasised the need of rendering skeletal services during industrial dispute by offering medical care to the poor masses. Although the health union is against such positions, she decided to make the necessary sacrifice in order to prevent avoidable deaths. After the strike, she is indicted by a panel set up by the hospital management to investigate the death of a little girl that died as result of delayed medical attention. Although she is not sacked, she resolved that her conscience would not allow such acts of injustice to humanity and tendered her resignation. In the same vein, Ebi in *The Activist* sacrificed her career in order to actualise her husband's plans. She resigned from her job as a university lecturer and served as the editor of her husband's newly established magazine, 'The Patriot'. She also used a special column in the magazine to propagate women's issues. She organised the women in her community to canvass for votes for her husband that is vying for the post of the governor in the Niger Delta state.

However, it is pertinent to note that male feminists do not only portray the changing roles of women in the society, their successes in their chosen area of interest and their ability to surmount challenges and emerge stronger, they also reveal the selfish and unwholesome activities of some women that inhibited the collective success of women. By this, they presented a balanced representation of women in order to address the threat posed by some women in the actualisation of women's quest for emancipation and equality in patriarchal societies. Madam Vee in *The Return of Ameze* is a wealthy woman that got her wealth through human trafficking and child labour. She deceived young girls by promising them good jobs in Europe only to sell them to her cohorts abroad as sex slaves. She used her jewellery stores, expensive boutiques and restaurants as a front for her shady business. However, she met her tragic end when Mrs Mary uncovered her dubious business and some of her cohorts are arrested at the airport. Madam Vee is shocked at the apparent fall of her business and wealth and immediately lost her sanity at the centre of a busy street. Gimba in *Sacred Apples* exposed the jealousy and blackmail that are common among women in polygamous homes and its attendant effects on the family. Aalimah and Salma in *Sacred Apples* engaged in diabolical activities in order to get their husband's undivided attention. Their activities and the animosity in the home lead to the relocation of Zahrah from the family house. At the end, they realise that they have made a terrible mistake when they lost their husbands to food poisoning. The girls that engage in illicit sexual activities and see prostitution as a quick way of getting rich regret their wrong decisions when they

realise too late that they have wasted the useful and productive years of their lives pursuing mundane things. Some of the girls die of strange illnesses and those that are fortunate not to contract terminal diseases are left with no womb and faced with the reality of their depleting wealth. The tragic end of these characters is aimed at serving as a deterrent to women that do not contribute meaningfully to women's progress in the society.

Adekoya opined that novels by male feminists:

... portray most of its female characters in a positive light. They are caring and loving mothers. ... they question the traditional belief that men are brave and valiant and women are chicken-hearted and weak, and inverts the gender based attributes. ... They come across as male feminists whose sole intention is to interrogate extremisms of radical feminists and correct distortions and misrepresentations of (traditional) injunctions that lead insidiously to oppression of women (p. 26).

Conclusion

The male feminists' portraiture of women opened new vistas for their gender and breaks new ground. They do not abandon their women folk to be tossed about by ugly traditions. These male authors are all aware that society cannot earn the respect and gratitude of the world in the midst of gender discrimination and exploitation, therefore, they take the initiative and set the pace, so that consciences can be freed, and through their energies, irrespective of sex. 'They question the consensual discourse of male omniscience and omnipotence, the kind of discourse that excludes women from effective decision making... The female writers blow the lid of inferiorisation and caused their pent-up moral insight to superannuate male tyranny ... there is a visible mutation from submissiveness to determined action.' (Nyamdi, p. 225) Also, the works of these male writers such as Felix Ogoanah, revealed that massive ethical reorientation of the immorality of prostitution and human trafficking together with their hazardous effects are needed in order to educate women about their positions, the true causes of their plight, the potentialities of overcoming them and realistic modalities for effecting change.

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