

## WOMAN AS OBJECT OF MALE GAZE IN SOME WORKS OF NIGERIAN ARTISTS.

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### **Abstract**

This essay interrogates visual representations of women in the fine arts especially paintings and drawings by Nigerian male artists. In it, I question how numerous issues pertaining to gender, sexuality and sexual differences are imagined and contested through artworks. I analyze some artworks by contemporary Nigerian male artists to see what layers of male gaze are in the Nigerian art scenario. I also take on the argument that some Nigerian male artists' perception of women in paintings reflects in most cases, the overriding traditional understanding of the woman as the differential, sexualized, and passive and equally subservient 'other.' The essay raises questions about the stereotypical stance of women as inferior and irrational beings, unable to engage critically and often understood from their ascribed inert domestic or sexual roles. This is in opposition to representations of men in pictures as engaging, assertive and active. The essay shows how the artist's (usually male) narcissistic imaginative creations are imagined in the public space, as reality.

The tendency to assume control over the 'other,' is not only linked to questions of Eurocentric/colonial gaze and its mechanism of representation but, have also been applied to how the male perceives and understands its relationship with the female 'other.' In the initial writings concerning the concept of gaze, it had been applied to how an audience viewed the people presented or depicted in visual culture. A central concern of this essay is to question how societal assumptions concerning women have affected how some male artists portray women in visual representations. It uses paintings by some Nigerian artists to interrogate and take on the argument that societal constructions about women equally influence how women are represented in paintings/drawings as eroticized and objectified subjects.

The varied manifestations of 'gaze' are typified by who appropriates the looking. However, the idea of male gaze as a "prescribed viewing position" was popularized in feminist/film theory debates, of the 1970s and 1980s, championed by Laura Mulvey, in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* published in 1975. Laura Mulvey was of the argument that "mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order." (16). Women were presented in films as sexually codified objects subjected under the gratifying and controlling gaze of men. Their roles in the cinema were basically to create striking images intended for erotic impact. (19). This is because the control, or colonizing, of the camera (and as a consequence, the gaze) emerges from the assumption of heterosexual<sup>1</sup> men as the main target spectators, and women as the 'watched' (19). The female figure in the motion picture exists as an inactive object for the gratifying viewing of both the (active and aggressive) male audience and the entire male characters in the film. Mulvey's theory was inspired by Sigmund Freud's theories of psychoanalysis, *Three essays on Sexuality*, where he (Freud) related "scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a curious and controlling gaze" (16).

Mulvey notes that the cinema developed scopophilia in its voyeuristic (erotic curiosity and controlling gaze of the 'other') and narcissistic (self-esteem through identification with the image seen) forms. (18). As Sigmund Freud theory proffers, when a man confronts a female body, the absence of phallus constantly creates tension in his psyche. This void the male viewer interprets as otherness and therefore chooses to fetishize the female to assuage his apprehension of castration (or losing phallic superiority) as well as assert dominion over the female (21). However, critical essays and debates, of post structuralism and postmodernism, concerning the concept of 'gaze' have continuously presented more recent departures (Patrick Fuery & Nick Mansfield 70) from Mulvey's opinion which seemed to have become a generalized theory. This "prescribed viewing position" in functioning like the concept of perspective,(76) in storyline structures of films, negates the fact that "point of views" are sometimes open to variations.(77). As Fuery and Mansfield opines, there are other sites of the gaze connected to film structures not included in Mulvey's erotic male-viewing position such as horror, comedy, tragedy etc.(78).

Other current postulations have dwelt on the notion that viewing positions are subject to individual outlooks (cultural, political and historical views) (77) "with readers continually adopting positions outside of those proffered by the mainstream gaze." (80) Again, Mulvey's male gaze theory appears limiting since it did not give explanation for "the pleasure of female viewers, or the male figure as object of the gaze." (Machael Walford). Other writers, like Moore cited in Walters, equally agree "that women can and do look actively and erotically at images of men." (238). In such instances the power correlation have shifted from the dominant ideology to men being seen (by women) as objects for erotic viewing. Notwithstanding these shifts in the perception of the theory of gaze, the structural concept of men as audience and women as 'watched,' is still prevalent.

Although 'male gaze' was initiated in the theoretical sphere of motion picture making, it has also been useful in the critique of varied categories of media such as, in advertisements, television and the fine arts. For instance, in advertizing cosmetics, the image of the model (woman) being shown on the product becomes, not just an image or commodity that aids in the marketing and sale of the product, but also an object of male gaze. As Maggie Wykes avers, by 'buying' the image on the product, the men 'get' the woman. (41). Men are encouraged to imitate how the images of men featured on a product look at the attractive image of the woman. While the image sold to women is intended to get the women buy the product and become more like the model advertizing it being admired by men, so that they too can magnetize male attention. Consequently, the images of women, that consolidate the products sold, clearly become the male gaze. These representations therefore reproduce, as Linda Nochlin affirms, society's and some artists' shared assumptions "about men's power over, superiority to, difference from and necessary control of women." (13). Using Mulvey as a point of departure, the essay interrogates visual representations of women in the fine arts, with emphasis on drawings and paintings of Nigerian male artists.

### **Art and the gaze**

The idea of male gaze is in numerous paintings of women produced predominantly by male Western artists, of historical repute. (Terry Barret9). Images of female nudes by traditional Western artists/painters were for male viewership. As Berger, cited in Barret, posits, it was because of male desire to logically eroticize and stare at women that such historically acclaimed nude paintings of women came into being. (9). For instance, Eileen Doughty notes that, "many

painters in the Renaissance era were commissioned to create pictures of naked women that the male commissioner would hang in their private rooms.”

(<http://www.twentyfirstcenturypublishers.com/index.asp?PageID=496>).

As Gary Peterson also mentions in his blog, Titian, an artist of the renaissance period, who painted the popular *Venus of Urbino* was commissioned by a wealthy merchant who merely sought to have a painting of a nude woman hung over the couch in his house, for his own viewing pleasure. (Beliefs, desires and the male gaze ). This argument recalls Aderonke Adesanya’s observation that most nude subjects in contemporary Nigerian art are collected by “private individuals and such genre are observable in private spheres such as hotel rooms and houses of individuals who have interest in and penchant for collecting them.” (16). Likewise, Edward Manet, whose painting *Olympia*, thought to be inspired by Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, had used the image of his nude model to project his personal desire, which was perhaps to eroticize the female (Beliefs, Desires and the Male Gaze). The painting’s public viewing, in the Parisian salon crowd of the eighteenth/nineteen centuries, caused a great controversy and still seems more notoriously naked where it is displayed in the Musee d’Orsay, Paris (Beliefs, Desires and the Male Gaze) It becomes obvious that the concept of female nude drawings and paintings stretched beyond the boundaries of aesthetics into the coffers of sexual voyeurism for the pleasures of male viewership.

Usually the demands were for female nudes as opposed to their male counterpart, indicating that their owners probably acquired the paintings for erotic viewing and sexual gratification purposes. As such, any attempt to replace images of nude females with those of the males would constitute, “violence... to the assumptions of a likely viewer.” (Cerise Myers 4). As Cerise Myers accurately elucidates, “the shock felt by anyone viewing males, rather than females, in these traditional works, would reveal just how clearly the subjects must necessarily be women, styled for a specifically male spectator.” (4).

In John Berger’s study of European nude, he observes that the female model was often displayed openly to the observer or painter who was usually male, or ultimately to view herself in a mirror, as the painter gazes at her. (FAQ What is male gaze). In presenting the eroticized woman, the blame and shame of male gaze is often shifted to the female, thus relieving the man of the guilt of male gratification. (Terry Berret 16). Berger’s argument equally supports thus, “You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.” (16). Since elsewhere it is said that, “art is a language and an artist's beliefs and desires are inherent in every visual element of the composition,” (Beliefs, desires and the male gaze ). It may be assumed that whatever an artist visually conceives in art is a reflection of his personal thoughts. Though, as Peterson avers, an individual’s thoughts and desires may not always determine his or her character, he also affirms that “art, like humor, provides a stage on which it is socially acceptable to act out one's fantasies. Artists can fly in the face of social mores and convention.” (Beliefs, desires and the male gaze). This points to how the male artist projects his personal thoughts and assumptions through objectifying females in paintings. It becomes ‘acceptable’ for the male artist to act out his fantasies of controlling and eroticizing the female through various artistic media.

As earlier mentioned, paintings of beautiful unknown nude women are mostly encountered in Western art history, whereas unidentifiable nude males were infrequently featured. Han Xinzhen Pema observes that, “Nude oil paintings have been regarded as a celebration of feminine beauty and artists have often drawn inspiration from natural

surroundings, Biblical stories and mythological tales to portray them” (1). Usually the nude females were often surrounded with vegetative landscape scenarios. Rose quoted in Pema, affirms that, “paintings of Woman and Nature often share the same topography of passivity and stillness” (2). Relating the female body with the natural environment in paintings indirectly gives the impression that women are serene, passive and inert characters whose actions and rationality were controlled and guided by the male folk, just as the tranquil vegetative landscape is controlled<sup>2</sup> or intruded upon by humans (mostly men). Following Myers’ words, “women had been represented as beautiful and passively feminine, silent objects to be visually pleasing to a male audience and lacking a potentially offensive identity of their own” (3).

Although this essay focuses on some modern Nigerian male artists and their perception of the female through the visual oeuvres, it is vital to note that indigenous/traditional nude sculptures, though mostly stylized especially those of Yoruba origin, (Moyo Okediji) existed prior to colonial encounters in Africa. The numerous ancient African sculptures that allude to the female figure, which decorate museums in the West as well as in Nigeria, attest to this fact. In addition, it would be an oversight not to mention that carving/sculpture was the domain of males in traditional African societies. Though the nude figures/sculptures were for religious purposes, men’s monopoly of the social right of carving/sculpting in indigenous Africa, may have provided ‘justified’ space for carving exaggerated female nude sculptures thereby feeding their eroticized imaginations. As Gary Peterson affirms, “Art, like humor, provides a stage on which it is socially acceptable to act out one’s fantasies” (Beliefs, desires and the male gaze). This gives credence to the notion that, traditionally, males ascribed to themselves the right to decide and construct images of women as eroticized or subservient beings within the aesthetic domain and in the public sphere.

In the initial featuring of the African female body, in Western ethnographic and anthropological records dated back to the late eighteenth, nineteenth centuries and all through the early twentieth century, images of African women in photographs portrayed them for their “sexuality” and their domestic roles. These periods also saw women being “inferiorized and subordinated within hierarchic male-female discourse.” (Taiwo Olorunjoba-oju 1). The Europeans came under the cloak of merchants, ethnographers, missionaries and colonialists, alongside with their newly invented photographic implements. A critical look at the major reason for which the female was construed in photographs as such was, not only intended for ‘scientific’ purposes or as evidence of savagery often erroneously associated with black Africans but, to also satisfy the sexual curiosity of the European (majorly male) gaze. In this context, what comes readily to mind is the notorious exhibitionism of the Khoisan slave Saartje Baartman, in Europe in the early eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

As Abduraheem Nimah notes, the patriarchal customary laws (pre-colonial laws) which the British colonial indirect rule system of government upheld, in Nigeria, saw women as being “wives [bearers of men’s children] and producers of agriculture and other household goods,” and ultimately subordinate to the males either as husbands or as head of the family (3). As such, the domain of women as objects of both domestic exploitation and of being dependent, or subordinate, to men was already an established and internalized conception in pre-colonial Nigeria. In addition, the liberal nature of the newly emerging Western modernity in African colonies had occasioned an overt portrayal of women as objects of sexual voyeurism for the pleasures of men (the notion of the woman as liberated being viewed synonymous with sex). It consequently had an overriding influence on visual representations of women. Media depiction

of African women in advertisements was towards selling the image of women as sexualized models. Art therefore became the avenue for selling the idea of women as objects of male gaze.

With the institutionalization of Fine arts in Nigeria, in the early twentieth century following colonialism, many artists, of African origin, were trained in the skill of paintings and sculptures, in the tradition of Western art schools of thought. From the 1920s to the 1950s, Aina Onabolu,<sup>4</sup> with the aid of Kenneth Murray, introduced art into the secondary/tertiary academic curriculum, in Nigeria. As such, Western paradigm of classical art, particularly crystallized in figural naturalism as opposed to abstraction or the indigenous conceptual art of Africa, became the bane of practical/theoretical art tutorials in Nigeria. As Ola Oloidi suggests, “the narrow syllabus that was taught in the principal art institutions [from the colonial era of 1920s to 1950s] did not go beyond the study of Western Art History.” (3). It is remarkable that Aina Onabolu, an exponent of Western styled art in Nigerian and also a male artist, also produced a few nude paintings in this regard. For example, one of his paintings titled, “Painting of a nude girl,” depicted in Ola Oloidi’s essay, (Aina Onabolu, *Pioneer of Modern art in Nigeria: An introduction* 4) encapsulates the historical connection that Western styled nude paintings have with nude artworks produced by some modern Nigerian male artists. In view of this, nude drawings/painting may also have accompanied the figural naturalism taught especially in some tertiary art institutions of the colonial period.

However, due to Islamic as well as Christian religions in Nigeria, contemporary Nigerian society’s moral stance on nudity and nude art may have been considerably influenced. Aderonke Adesanya rightly argues that the religious persuasions of artists and their patrons, in the modern Nigerian scenario (1960s onwards), greatly affected the creative output of artists. (19). However, it could be dangerous to generalize. This is because many modern Nigerian artists (not withstanding their religious affiliations) are equally secular and open-minded in their artistic presentations. The individualistic character of art creates variety and vibrancy and as such, different artists present different strokes to similar genres. I can argue that just as Christianity is an offspring of colonialism in Africa, likewise nude paintings/drawings, in the framework of male gaze, became overtly feasible with the emergence of colonial or Western/modern art in Nigeria. Again, the democratization of media from the late 1990s up into the twenty-first century, in sub-Saharan Africa, coupled with acculturation of Western modernization provided easier access to information, particularly the virtual information. The internet is one source which the younger Nigerian generation identifies with and from which many have unlimited access to liberal thoughts concerning sex which has “contributed in no small measure to the removal of guilt, fear and shame associated with unconventional sexual activities.” (B.O. Longe et al 3-4) Consequently, many now internalize, openly view, and consider various indecent and belittling images, in which women are usually the victims, as normal. This may have also influenced and emboldened some Nigerian artists of the young generation to venture their eroticized or objectified paintings/drawings of women into the public sphere.

Beyond the visual art circles, objectification of women, in the Nigerian context, can be glimpsed from Taiwo Oloruntoba-oju’s essay titled, *Body images, beauty culture and language in the Nigeria, African Context*. Oloruntoba-oju’s essay on the perception of body images in traditional and contemporary Nigeria, as opposed to the Western construct and as evidenced in language and literature, (3) indicates that the concept of male gaze applies also within the Nigerian literary framework. For instance, in analyzing Owolebi the massive lady, in Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, while she danced, Taiwo Oloruntoba-oju mentions that the comments of the male ‘interpreters,’ went beyond appreciation of beauty aesthetics into the

domain of provocative sexual desiring through engaged looking (gaze). (9). Aside from her identity as Owolebi, the male viewers' discussion, while she danced, centered on her body image, analyzing and reimagining her as though she were a commodity whose quality is her sexual endowment. The comments created the impression that her existence and identity subordinates under the hegemonic or acerbically sexualized construct of the male beholders as opposed to her as a rational being. The narrative thus presents a severing of the captive's body from its motive will, its active desire. (9). It is also important to recall that the writer is male. As such, it becomes obvious also that some Nigerian/African male writers equally use their writings to project men's assumed superiority or dominance over women by inadvertently reinforcing the social roles already assigned to the females, (Bernice Ezeilo 20) in their works. These constructed stereotypes concerning the female are, sometimes, envisaged in the artworks of some Nigerian male artists.

The society or social structure that we exist in is one that encourages a patriarchal hegemonic system and as such, this reflects upon how our views are shaped or constructed. Linda Nochlin mentions that one of the key rationale of patriarchal ideology is to mask the power relationships that constitute society in such a manner as to appear natural or normal and eternally true. (Linda Nochlin 1). Under such power relations, women are educated to recognize and internalize those restrictions as the 'norm,' and as is to be expected or anticipated. (Ann Kaplan 36). This possibly explains why, as Ann Kaplan points out, women are constructed "in very specific ways – ways that reflect patriarchal needs, the patriarchal unconscious," (36) in the visual arts, particularly films, and paintings. As Nochlin states,

the ways in which representations of women in art are founded upon and serve to reproduce indisputably accepted assumptions held by society in general, artists in particular, and some artists more than others, about men's power over, superiority to, difference from, and necessary control of women, assumptions which are manifested in the visual structures as well as the thematic choices of the pictures in question.... manifest itself as much by what is unspoken – unthinkable, unrepresentable – as by what is articulated in a work of art. (13).

In articulating societal/ideological assumptions (through visualizing eroticized and objectified images of women) in works of art, artists are rendered culpable, and so are the cultural mannerisms, societal traditions and institutions that engender them. All these ideologies are mutually shared irrespective of geographical locations, that is, by the different groups/peoples of this era, and invariably represent "an ongoing subtext underlying almost all individual images involving women." (13-14). Similar perceptions about women are also encountered in the Nigerian context, since "the patriarchal discourse of power over women," as Nochlin puts it, (14) is equally a deeply contested terrain in the public space. For instance, in some of the *Nollywood*<sup>5</sup> movies that circulate in Nigeria, Nigerian women are constantly portrayed as being "submissive, helpless and disempowered." (Janki Patel). Again the younger actresses are usually projected, perhaps as a sign of independence, as being 'sexy' by appearing in skimpy attires as though female assertiveness is associated with uncontrolled sexuality. Concerning these images often portrayed of Nigerian women, Janki Patel observes that it "does not entirely indicate the independence and self-sustaining abilities of women." (Review of Nigerian Videos: Born Again and Submission). Many Nigerian women have their various

sources of income and this tendency to stereotype Nigerian women, and women in general, in visual representations “reinforces the false ideology that African women are indeed incapacitated.” (Janki Patel Review of Nigerian Videos: Born Again and Submission). These projections of the female are rarely envisaged in reality and do not provide space for the socio-economic changes that has transformed, and continues to change, the stance of women in the Nigerian society. The only pointer as to why this is the case is perhaps because we still operate patriarchal controlled systems both at the family unit up to the wider social sphere. As Patel confirms, where reactionary men still create and maintain policies in society,<sup>6</sup> it becomes difficult for there to be a positive change in the ways men portray or represent women in the society. Because of these notions, representations of women, by Nigerian men in visual culture, are influenced largely by how the society has conditioned the male (artist) to view women generally.

It is vital to mention that the concept of male gaze does not only necessarily entail nudity. There are different layers of the gaze that can be observed in the various visual representations of women. This implies that a fully clad female can still constitute an object of desire, for visual consumption, by the male artist/audience. For instance, Moslem women despite being veiled, under the *hijab*, may still constitute subjects of gaze. In some of the painting produced by Nigerian male artists, I noticed that though nude paintings of women exist, there is this tendency not to be overwhelmingly explicit in the representations of female nudes. Also most of the nudes may have been imaginary creations of the artists or inspired by ‘playboy’ or soft sell magazine models as opposed to the western nude paintings in which real life nude models were posed for the paintings. During my undergraduate days as an art student, at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, I could recall that all the female models used for drawings, paintings or sculptures, were always fully clad. There were no nude painting or drawing sections. I also observed a similar trend when I visited the Fine Art Department at Amadu Bello University, Zaria, where on further investigation I was told that nude drawing sections were not encouraged since the department does not have the facilities for such classes. From this it becomes clear that nude model as an option is not common in most art institutions in Nigeria. However an individual could decide on his personal arrangement to have a female model pose for him. Other than that, it could be assumed that most female nudes painted are the artists personal imaginative constructs. These presentations of the female are mostly devoid of the individual’s identity, if there is any, but instead focuses more on, as Nochlin puts it, “assumptions about women’s weakness and passivity; her sexual availability for men’s needs; her defining domestic and nurturing function; her identity with the realm of nature; her existence as object rather than creator of art.” (5).

In some of the paintings that I analyze in this essay, I noticed that most of the nude images of women were not explicitly portrayed as opposed to those created by Western artists. Perhaps our orientation of attributing shame to nudity might have occasioned the need to avoid being impudent in representing images of nudes. That notwithstanding, it is glaring from those images that women are also sexualized and objectified in various ways, by some male Nigerian artists and through the presence of male beholders. It would not be surprising therefore that in the exhibition catalogues which I consulted, male artists created the nude/objectified paintings of women. By analyzing works, which had previously exhibited, this essay intends to show that an audience have previously, and publicly, viewed these works. The women appear absorbed in themselves as though they are unaware of the voyeurism they exude.

In figure one titled *Attitude* by Akanimoh Umoh, is a painting of a female. The figure is bare up to the midriff while from waist downwards is covered. Though the artist made effort to be slightly modest nonetheless, from the painting, he attempts to eroticize the female. One of her arms is up while the other slightly hangs close to her back, with her bare chest jutting out towards the audience's view in a reckless abandon as though the subject is not ashamed to express her sexuality. The exposed part of the figure was painted with earthy colours – red, umber and sienna, suggesting that the subject is of African descent. However, the figure may be either that of a model or an outright imagination of the artist. Her face and her chin tilts upwards and away from the observer view. Because of this, it directs the audience's attention and interest away from ascribing identity to the female. The subject's anonymity could be read as merely an object intended for erotic viewing by both the male artist and the entire male audience that confronts the image. The flame-like orange and yellowish hue, surrounding the exposed area of the body particularly helps to intensify and direct the audience's attention to the bared busts.



**Figure I**  
**Title: Attitude**  
**Artist: Akanimoh Umoh**  
**Year: 2001**  
**Medium: Oil on Canvas**

Also the gestures of the figure exudes and gives the impression of a female in an alluring and shameless sexualized poise intended perhaps to magnetize male attention. The figure recalls Jean-Auguste-Dominique-Ingres' oil on canvas painting titled *Odalisque with slave* in its attempt to conceal the lower part of the body with fabric. However, in *Odalisque with slave*, the artist intrinsically paints the fabric to outline the shape of the figure. However, it can be argued that the image represents the artist's understanding of the female as an object of male dominance, control and eroticization that is born out of what is obtained at the society level. For instance, a woman who dresses in revealing clothes is understood as being loose yet when a male artist reveals his imaginations of nude women on the canvas, it becomes socially acceptable and even institutionalized for him to act out his fantasies under the guise of visual aesthetics.

None of these paintings tried to show the female in a more challenging and active form and as a rational individual. In *I have been here before*, by George Odo (fig. 2), voyeurism and erotic exhibitionism seem to have been equally accentuated. The painting made on fabric with textile ink, is a monochrome in which the artist depicts a stark female nude. However only the subject's back view is made visible in the work for the viewer's pleasure. The figure's arms and feet are submerged into the background of the piece. The face, like in *Attitude*, is obscure and directed from the audience's viewpoint. This absence of frontal view or face is also symbolic of a lack of personality and individuality. On another interpretation, the subject can be construed as constituting a tensed motion as though she is about to flee from an undisclosed assailant, or metaphorically as though she is rejecting the stereotype constructed around her. The female as a sexualized being makes obvious ingrained societal assumptions reenacted in diverse forms, in this case in art form, by men. The nude figure appears unaware of being viewed thus reiterating notions of male voyeurism. It feels as though the artist, and consequently the viewer, is occupying the subject's private space. In the formalized institution called art, male artists get the opportunity to actualize their eroticized and objectified views of women.



**Figure 2**

**Artist: George Odo**

**Title: I have been here before**

**Year: Unknown**

**Medium: Pen and Ink on paper.**

Male voyeurism or fetishism in art, is often occasioned by a pleasure in secretly viewing what is prohibited in relation to the female body. (Linda Nochlin 17). The female's over-exposed self also appears to be submissive, by being passive and available, thus assuring as Nochlin puts it, "a masculinisation of the spectatorial position." (17). Female spectators, following societal assumption, are equally taught to view images of women through men's eyes. That is, the female's self-image is unconsciously conditioned by, and must conform to, male expectations

and not necessarily based on how she perceives herself. As a result, she becomes an objectified pose displayed for the male gaze. The subject also parallels Henri Matisse's *La Joie de vivre* in which women bathers in various reclining poses, are portrayed in the landscapes as being synonymous and embedded with "the forces of nature." (422). In addition, artists like Paul Gauguin, Paul Cezanne, all attempted to associate nude women with nature in their paintings. (422). Similarly, the dark patches in which the nude figure in *I have been here before* is almost submerged, and the textual/vegetative feel of the background, gives the impression that the figure is inundated into nature.



**Figure 3**  
**Artist:** Olisa Nwoye  
**Title:** *Women in Power*  
**Year:** 2010  
**Medium:** Oil on Canvas

Also, the de-emphasising of frontal view or face as a symbol of a lack of personality and individuality can be observed in Olisa Nwoye's *Woman in power* (fig. 3). The obscure faces of the female figures and the highlighted bare angles are certainly voyeuristic as the artist while depersonalizing the subjects intentionally or unintentionally invites the viewer to participate in seeing the exposed forms.



**Fig 4**

**Medium: Oil on Canvas**

**Artist: Unknown**

**Year: Unknown**

In Fig 4, the subject saddles a child on her back while at the same time is perhaps washing clothes. Her feet are in the stream in which she is performing her chores. The subject echoes women's nurturing and domestic role, which reflects what is supposedly the woman's role in the society. Men tend to capitalize on that. A domestic setting, which is traditionally a confining space for women, is intended to, not only highlight the female's strength and character in accommodating daily multitasks but also, be a passive and submissive figure, in line with societal construct of women. Women are expected to perform house chores while men are in most cases not encouraged to do so as a sign of their masculinity. Men are supposedly expected to feature in more 'active' and demanding works as a sign of their superiority and strength. Women who venture into more engaging and active professions, as Bernice Ezeilo mentions, are given such names as "akada, dragon, iron lady or steel lady, Thatcher, Tigress, woman liber." (18). This is because they are sometimes considered as threats to their male counterparts or colleagues, and in some cases to their husbands. In her painting titled *Acada Woman*, Aderonke Adesanya also questions patriarchal assertions over women. She explains thus:

... I take on three issues prevalent in my part of the world [Nigeria]. First, I consider the subjectivity of patriarchal culture, which believes that productivity and indeed fruitfulness are mainly anchored by reproductive power – the ability to have offsprings to carry on one's lineage.... Secondly, I critique the reckless denigration of female intellectuals by a society which holds the notion that such women are overtly confrontational and blame the conditions of those who are not married among them or who do not have children on their confrontational position.... The capability of the

intellectual woman goes beyond making babies and her intellect and energy impact more on humanity than has been acknowledged. (19-20).

Though Adesanya sees society's equation of nudity with obscenity, as opposed to it connoting purity in the traditional era, as being pretentious, (19) I argue that its presentation in contemporary contexts has, in the hands of male artists, been used to inferiorize women as mere sexualized objects for erotic viewing. The gendered disparities, as depicted here, raises questions concerning the equality and inferiorizing of women, and is thus subsumed under the discourse of patriarchal hegemony within a capitalist social order. A society that has limited, controlled, subjugated and treated women as property could also control how women are represented and these representations invariably tend to serve and assuage the needs of the comparably more powerful men.

In Mead's study of various societies, he observed that, "standardized personality differences between the sexes are cultural creations to which each generation of male and female is trained to conform." (18). This invariably implies that cultural institutions controlled by a male dominated society created most of the societal norms, which prevail until date concerning the attitudes of the sexes. Most societal norms concerning the place of men and women in the society are taught to both sexes from birth to adulthood and as such do not necessarily have bearing on the biological attributes of the sexes. For example, as Ezeilo points out, "many societies, including the Igbo society, have for years, used this fact of biological differences to limit the social roles women are allowed to play and the social heights they are permitted to reach." (18). The same is said of other societies in Nigeria. Aside from the biological differences between males and females, women can also accomplish the roles that men perform in the society. (18). Since from birth, an individual is trained "in attitudes, beliefs and behaviours appropriate to his culture," (18). The Nigerian male and female learns the cultural norms assigned to them, and internalizes it as a natural law. Women are therefore confined, in artistic representations, in their domestic roles as mothers and in their home making and housekeeping roles.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, these representations concerning women are archetypical to what the Nigerian male artist, who existing in a patriarchal society, assumes is the norm. Though there may be nothing particularly wrong in depicting women while performing housekeeping functions, one wonders why the male artist finds it difficult to present the female in her active and engaging form. Perhaps the idea of portraying a female that deconstructs societal conceptions may not be an appealing subject to the male artist and the entire male viewers. Women therefore must be depicted as frail, passive, submissive or exposed as sexualized subjects to, perhaps, assuage male apprehension of lack of masculinity and as pleasurable or erotic objects intended for male viewing. The analyzed paintings above have therefore created space for one to confirm that the genre of male gaze, as it relates to the issue of eroticization and objectification of female subjects is not only peculiar to the Western art. In various ways, some paintings done by some contemporary Nigerian artists (predominantly males) represent and project women through the visual media as eroticized and subservient subject for the pleasurable viewing of male folks. This as I mentioned earlier is because of societal assumptions in a capitalist, but most especially,

patriarchal hegemonic system which the male artist had already internalized and subsequently depicts in pictures and paintings as the real. Male artist who venture into the subjects that concerns women should therefore present a more holistic outlook concerning what obtains in reality as opposed to their personal assumptions/imaginings about women. A critical look at how Nigerian female artists portray women as subjects could be made to see, on one hand, the extent that they have been influenced by societal assumptions concerning their gender or, if the artistic media may have provided space for refuting certain erroneous societal assumptions about their fellow women as exemplified in Adesanya's *Acada Woman*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>It can be assumed that for men whose sexual orientations incline towards homosexuality, their gaze would be directed to their male counterpart.

<sup>2</sup>In traditional patriarchal societies, men inherit land just as they equally consider women as their acquired property.

<sup>3</sup> Saatje Baartman is a South African woman of Khoisan heritage who was taken as a slave to Europe in the early eighteenth century. There she was constantly exhibited for people (usually European males) to view. Though the reasons for exhibiting her was erroneously meant to record physical differences between Africans and Europeans, however the main purpose was to racialize and eroticize African females who were thought to be barbaric or animalistic beings, in line with their male counterparts.

<sup>4</sup>Aina Onabolu was popular for his penchant for painting portraits of Yoruba women. Although his subjects were usually fully clad he also made a few nude female paintings.

<sup>5</sup>A term often associated with Nigerian Movie Industry.

<sup>6</sup> Here, Patel Janki attempted to show how a patriarchal society influences to a great extent how women are perceived in the society. She engaged Nkiru Nzegwu's article *Islam and its Bigots: The case of Safiyatu Huseini Tugur Tudu*, to confirm how conservative Moslem men using the cover of Islam, impose a regime of submissiveness on poor Moslem women in northern parts of Nigeria.

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