

GENDER POLITICS

**Women's Writings and Film
in Northern Nigeria**

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CHAPTER

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Images of the Woman in Olu Obafemi's *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, From the Belly of Time*

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Abstract

Compared to the real and actual roles contemporary women have, and continue to play in the public sphere, women in Nigerian literature have usually been portrayed as passive actors in the criticism and reconstruction of society by the first products of first generation of male Nigerian literary artists such as Soyinka and Achebe. There is however a marked difference in the portrayal of women in the works of the second generation of Nigerian writers such as Olu Obafemi and Femi Osofisan. This paper examines Olu Obafemi's *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time* with the aim of investigating the images of women employed in the collection of poetry which thematic focus is the positive transformation of society. The paper reveals that Obafemi, borrowing from African oral tradition depicts women as active participants both in the destruction and reconstruction of society. The paper concluded that this depiction of women is in conformity with the African conception of gender.

Introduction

The first generation of Nigerian male writers used their art to respond, first to the evils inherent in colonialism and later those of the corrupt leadership that manifested after colonialism. Foremost among such writers are Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe. For instance, the role

Segi plays in Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* (2004 [first published in 1967]) could have been more edifying but for the fact that she is a prostitute. In Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966), Eunice is the only female character who is among the group that attempts to resist the ruling party. However, she is a minor character who is given no major part to play. Eunice's shooting of Chief Koko could have been given a significant social role but for the narrative's disparaging remark which made her action to be seen as that of a woman who is hurt that her mate (husband) had been killed:

Then she opened her handbag as if to take out a handkerchief, took out a pistol instead and fired two bullets into Chief Koko's chest. Only then did she fall down on Max's body and begin to weep like a woman ... (160).

Such first generation of Nigerian male writings seemed not to have been inspired by real life female characters in the resistance of oppressive regimes. This is in spite of the active roles which women played in real life in the protests against perceived oppressive colonial and post colonial policies. Such women included Gambo Sawaba, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti and Margaret Ekpo. Before them had been the examples set by the women who fought the 1929 Aba Women's Riot in protest against obnoxious taxation by the colonial administration and the 1947 Egba Women's Uprising in Abeokuta. Therefore, the first generation of Nigerian writers cannot lay claim to not having real-life models.

This is not to say that the writings of the first generation of Nigerian male literary artists were populated by women who played active roles in maintaining these oppressive governments. Women in such writings are portrayed largely as weak and silent either in maintaining the oppressive systems or in resisting them. According to Okereke (1998) this voicelessness of women in literature is a transposition of the myth that female vocality is subversive while silence is virtuous:

Paradoxically, women are stigmatized for being garrulous and flippant, while men are assumed to be taciturn but pithy in their speech. Vocality then signifies more than voicing and means attention – compelling, 'weighty' speech (connoting power). And silence signifies more than voicelessness and means frivolous speech (connoting powerlessness) (136).

However, the second generation of Nigerian male writers

attempted to destroy this myth as they depict women in active roles both in positive and negative light in their works. Although the emergent concept was first used in reference to Nigerian drama/theatre, today its application cuts across the genres of drama, prose and poetry. The writers of this generation who began writing in the 1970s include Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Bode Sowande and Kole Omotoso (qtd. in Obafemi 1982). These writers have been referred to as Emergent. The paper attempts an exploration of the images of women in the poetry collections of Olu Obafemi titled *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time* (2009).

Nigerian Emergent Writing

While Raymond Williams (1975 and 1978) may be credited with creating the concept 'emergent' in his theorizing on cultural materialism, Obafemi (1982 and 1996) redesigned the concept to suit Nigerian literature. Emergent writing is seen in opposition to the dominant culture which characteristic is the maintenance of an oppressive status quo. Thus, the characteristics of emergent writing among others include a negation and criticism of oppressive systems; the identification of the people responsible for such systems and the creation of an alternative system which is perceived to be liberating. The negation of the old order and the establishment of a new one are usually achieved through collective action after a re-awakening and conscientization of the oppressed.

Several critics that have come after Obafemi have attempted to give new names to such a literature. Akinwale (1993) calls it 'protest'; Gbilekaa (1997) refers to it as 'radical' while Ododo (2004) prefers the term 're-creative'. Contributing to the debate on terminology is beyond the scope of this paper. What is deemed important is the establishment of a difference between the works of the first and second generations of Nigeria male writings on the basis of ideology. This ideology manifests in various ways; one of these is in the depiction of the female. The portrayal of the female in Olu Obafemi's *Illuminations: Songs, Dances, from the Belly of Time* (2009) who is an emergent writer is similar to that which is discernible in the African concepts of gender and feminism.

African Concept of Gender and Feminism

African culture conceives of the relationship between the man and the woman in complementary terms, rather than in terms of

superiority and inferiority. In African culture, feminism does not preach the hatred of the man and therefore is accommodationist (Acholonu, 1995; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Kolawole, 1997). One of the implications of these two features is that since the man is not regarded as the enemy; it is the structures in the society that need to be changed. The African concept of feminism thus perceives both the man and the woman as capable of being both beneficiaries and victims of any oppressive structure.

The analysis of the selected text reveals that Obafemi conforms to these African concepts of gender and feminism.

Images of the Woman in Olu Obafemi's *Illuminations* **Woman as Muse**

In 'Homage to Ajon' (4), Obafemi adopts Ajon as his muse. In fact, the theatre group he founded in the University of Ilorin in 1981 is called Ajon Players. Ajon was the first wife of the first king of Kiri, the hometown of Obafemi. Ajon is credited with beauty and for playing a crucial role in the creation of the Olukiri dynasty. This act of hers earned her the honour of a festival that was begun after her death. Her acts of courage and commitment to her husband are the essences which Obafemi, in an interview with Ododo (2000), says have always fascinated him even as a child:

I always fancied watching an Ajon festival and it always gave me some form of artistic inspiration. I see Ajon as a woman of gallantry ... The personality and presence of a woman of that stature awes you. Whoever is incarnating Ajon at any point is somebody who must wear that physiognomy of gallantry and valour (Ododo, 2000: 326).

Illuminations is a collection of poems which catalogue the ills of the society which the poet sees as 'hideous darkness' (1). Therefore, just as some of the poems in the collection set out to show the oppressed the way out of this darkness, some lambast those whom the poet considers are responsible for some of these ills, namely the ruling class. Tackling the ruling class in this manner therefore needs some courage, hence the poet affirms thus:

I borrow prologue melodies
Laden with the laughter of truth
Filled with the lurid lyrics of fertility
To tell the putrescent tales of the moment;

For only the light tones of Ajon's herald
Enablè the arsenals and vituperation
That is my story ('Homage to Ajon' 5).

The poem is incantatory and Obafemi seeks a re-incarnation of the Ajon's renowned beauty: 'Hail Ajon!/Avatar-Exquisite Beauty' ('Homage to Ajon' 4). Consequently Obafemi asserts: 'But armed with the witty wiles of your witty words/I shall shatter mountainous myths built on dunes' ('Homage to Ajon' 4). The poet then attempts to do this in the collection through his use of imageries and other literary devices that appeal to all the senses.

Obafemi also borrows from the song and dance aesthetics of the Ajon festival in his collection. In the preface, the poet posits that the drums, the flutes, *Agidigbo*, the castanet along with the voice and dance are the 'essential implements for engaging' with the collection (Preface: vi). In 'Homage to Ajon', the poet acclaims:

I Strike/ The slender sticks
That summon the early morning melodies
On the wooden membranes of *Agidigbo*
Your rousing rhythm (4).

'Homage to Ajon' (4) begins and ends with a song which is celebratory and invocatory and re-enacts the sounds made by the sticks used on the wooden musical instrument – *Agidigbo*. Aliyu-Ibrahim (2010) asserts that the songs in the collection enhance the performance feature of the collection.

Woman as Activist

Obafemi in this collection presents the woman as an activist. Instances of these are in 'Good Night, Mother of Songs' (27) and 'The Song Temopinni Left Behind' (95).

'Good Night, Mother of Songs' (27) is a tribute to the late South African musician and anti-apartheid activist Miriam Makeba at her death. The poem begins with a dirge to the departed singer. As the living is urged to 'raise a song/For Mother of songs/on a journey of no return' (27), the poem moves on to describe the welcome being organized at the 'Gates of Heaven' by earlier departed male musicians who, in their lifetimes, had also used their music to seek for change. This serves as assurance that Makeba would not be lonely in the land of the dead as she would be in the company of other colleagues such as Jimmy Cliff, Bob Marley, Orlando Owoh and Sunny Okosun.

They are mentioned as those awaiting her arrival with 'Cee-Dees of the songs you sang/ Magical lyrics which made/ Apartheid scamper for safety' (27). These lines change the tone from a mournful one, first to a celebratory one and then to a tone of defiance. The poet achieves this by incorporating the lyrics of some of the popular songs of Marley and the Black American group, Boney M, into the poem:

To emancipate themselves from mental slavery;
Crooning with your sisters
No Babylonians can stop the song
Of tomorrow's hope:
The Whalers wail not—
They shall wriggle with the wreaths on the tomb-side
They shall not blink at the boom of Atomic energy
As you soar with wings of a dove
Beyond the limits of the skies... (Good Night, Mother of Songs 28).

The poet praises Makeba's songs for having contributed to the release of Nelson Mandela who was incarcerated in prison for twenty-seven years in South Africa for his anti-apartheid stance: '... your voice ... tore the walls of Robben Island/And the madiba emerges'(28). This is an allusion to the tearing of the walls of Jericho by Joshua in the Bible (*RSV Bible*, Joshua 6: 1-20).

Obafemi recalls Makeba's other notable achievements such as her impressive performance at the Festival of Black Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, Nigeria when he refers to her as 'Festac Mama' (28).

In spite of the fact that apartheid may have ended, a note of caution is introduced with the line: 'It is not yet Uhuru (28). This is however quickly tempered with another assuring note with the reference to Makeba as 'Mother of a thousand songsters/ Rising/ From the lonesome belly of Apart- hate,/ Building blocks moulded from your songs/ Of freedom. This recognizes that her activism has inspired others in other struggles for freedom across the world. Hence the reference in the poem to another activist, the African-American feminist, Alice Walker: Walker writes for your son Obama/ She writes for you as well (29).

In the poem made up of thirteen stanza of different lengths, reference is made to Miriam Makeba as 'Mother' (with Mama and Yeye being synonyms). The use of motherhood as a metaphor implies that such a character possesses inner strength and is involved in the

teaching, nurturing and creation of humanity. Values associated with motherhood are 'derived from ancient African philosophy and cosmology that in the words of an Akan saying recognize that through the womb of the woman all humanity passes' (Badejo: 1998). Thus, the mother is perceived as teacher, nurse, and nurturer of humanity.

In the poem 'The Song Temopinni Left Behind' (95), Obafemi expands the picture of the woman activist to include the non-educated woman of the older generation. In other words, women (especially African women) of all ages and periods have always possessed the intellectual capacity to protest, in various ways, against perceived oppression. The poem chronicles some of the evils of colonialism. The colonialists had used the evangelizing mission as excuse to rob the African not only of his name, but also of his/ her culture which to the African was his/ her identity. Consequently, the poem mourns that his grandmother who was named Temopinni was given a new name, Sarah:

The man of Mission,
After a fierce flung and fling
Dipped you in the shallow *Arelu* River
And with a sign of the cross,
Twisted your tongue, Grandma,
Draped you in a new garment and a new name:
Sarah (The Song Temopinni Left Behind 95).

The words and the alliteration achieved through the repetition of the voiceless fricative [f], suggests some form of force on the part of the person carrying out the baptism and a consequent voiceless resistance by the person being baptised. This imagery is emphasized through the use of the word 'twisted' in the phrase 'twisted your tongue'.

Apart from this, the African, represented here by the poet's grandmother, Temopinni, is divested of more aspects of his culture like his/ her job such as the mandatory circumcision 'that carved manhood into shape,/ Making men out of the generations of bare boys of Odo-Aofin'(96). Temopinni was the woman who performed this circumcision.

Stripping the African of his name and language and culture is seen by the poet as a way of colonizing and totally subduing the African. Thus, rather than the native language and songs which the African is familiar with, 'a Babel of adlibs/Of Hymnals you could not sing/murmurs and whispers of verses you could not read,/became

their wily ways for your keeps'. The allusion to the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel (*The RSV Bible*, Genesis 11. 9) underscores the confusion that is wrought on the African mentality by such a change.

The imagery of the silent resistance introduced early in the poem is foregrounded in the song which, in an interview with this researcher, Obafemi (2010) says is a personal composition by his grandmother:

*Whiteman
Changed my tongue at Baptism
And named me Sarah
I ask you;
What part of my anatomy
Looks like Sarah? (The Song Temopinni Left Behind 97).*

In this song, Temopinni rejects the new name because it is not reflective of her belief, her culture and her history. The word *anatomy* (or *body*) is a translation of the word 'ara'. 'Ara' goes beyond the physical body or anatomy. It connotes the totality of generic man's being. The song is therefore Temopinni's own way of rejecting some of the aspects of colonialism, especially the damaging part which seeks to destroy a being in order to mold him/her into another being's conception of "beingness". This is a song which the poem claims helped those coming after to retrieve their lost identities 'from the clutches of strange verses and tedious hymns' (96) and the poem asserts that:

*Many have found old ways,
Old garments and new names;
Adire have crept back on our new-found loins-
(The Song Temopinni Left Behind 97).*

However, there are still those who have stuck to the new (colonized) ways. The poet mourns them and calls them 'new slaves to faith and to new lores'. This can be gleaned from the insistence of such people to change names that have relationship with African gods and other pantheons such as Ogun and Ifa. The poet sees this as 'All echoes of poor digestion/Of foreign tongues (97). Obafemi therefore appeals:

*Go down the corridor of memories
And pick grandma's song
The whiteman dipped me in shallow rivers
Cleaned my tongue and clipped my name*

*And named me Dorcas
Yet,
No shred of my anatomy
Bears Dorcas (The Song Temopinni Left Behind 98).*

Woman as Mother

'A Word for Mama' (92) pays homage to the poet's mother and celebrates some of the qualities associated with motherhood. Employing the imagery of a hunter in search of game, the poet says he sought for an appropriate word that would capture the essence of motherhood. The inspiration for the right word was finally got from Alice Walker's *In search of our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) some of the words of which the poet borrows for the poem:

*"How they know what we
Must know
Without knowing a page
Of it
Themselves"* (A Word for Mama 93).

The poet commends his mother for imparting on him and her other children knowledge of their double heritages (their Okun [African] culture and the Christian religion). Also borrowing Walker's use of the pun on the word 'know', Obafemi extols his mother's altruism in ensuring that they received the Western education which she never had:

*You knew that we
Must know;
You toiled that we
Must know;
You bled that we
Must know* (A Word for Mama 93).

He realizes her love, selflessness and sacrifice for them and in urging: 'Mama stay, Stay then' is hopeful that she does not die before they can 'show you a little from what you gave us' (A Word for Mama 94).

Woman as God

'Sky plea to Mother' (90) is an allusion to an African folktale which seeks to explain the reason for the rough back of the tortoise. The folktale recounts the story of the dog who tactfully puts his mother in heaven rather than give her up to be killed and eaten as decided

upon by all the other animals during a time of famine. The mother dog at the request of her child which is rendered in a song would send down a ladder which the dog-child would use to climb into heaven and be consequently fed. Tortoise finds out dog's secret and in a betrayal, attempts to get to heaven for a meal without the dog. He is thrown off and his shell is cracked.

However, in view of the purpose of the collection, Obafemi gives the folktale a revolutionary interpretation. The first stanza gives a hint of the setting of hunger and want with the poet's use of contrast in the dog-child's song to his mother: 'Fatten your offspring /In the season of mass famine' (90). The second stanza strengthens this setting when the dog-child says:

I who have hidden you
In the skies
When others slaughter theirs
To calm the worms ravaging empty tummies
(Sky Plea to Mother 90).

The use of the word 'worm' suggests decay and rottenness from the inside brought about by hunger. This is a literary allusion to Ayi Kwei Armah's (1968) *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* who had employed the imagery of Rama Krishna who in spite of living a clean life, had maggots replacing his vital organs. Armah uses this imagery of decay to show that fighting corruption in post-independent Ghana was a fruitless venture. The imagery of decay in the collection of poetry under decay is foregrounded in the third stanza when the dog-child is set against those responsible for this hunger that is causing decay originating from the insides of the people. Obafemi calls them 'scaly scavengers' (90). In reference to the betrayal of the people's trust by a corrupt leadership, the poem warns:

Treacherous foes—
Tortoise of the grove
Have abused the merciful lead
Down mother's twine of plenty
A cracked back is his reward.
Let those who sow the wind
Reap the whirlpool (Sky Plea to Mother 90).

The poet then changes the song sung by the dog-child to: '(Mother, /Coil your ropes/Traitors are on the prowl'.

It is interesting to note that the rope of plenty in this poem is

thrown down or coiled at the request of the dog-child, and not at the whim of the mother in heaven. Thus, the actions of the mother (or god) are as directed by man on earth. This is representative of emergent writers' views of the relationship between man and the gods (or God).

Woman as Wife

Obafemi dedicates one of the poems in the collection to his wife, Dupe. 'You are the Poem of my life' (99) was written in the year 2008 to commemorate the fiftieth birthday anniversary of his wife; a period which Obafemi calls 'the Autumn season of life' (99). This poem recalls one of the qualities which Obafemi admires in his muse, Ajon; namely dedication.

The poet contrasts different imageries to capture how life was for him before and after he married Dupe:

Life, which now yields a bouquet of roses,
Was very like a forest of bastard weeds;
Life which is now a banquet of joy,
Was even like a bundle of pain
(You are the poem of my life, 99).

The poet borrows the essence of her name in full and thanks her for the years of dedication:

Let me borrow your name then – Dupelola –
The wealth of gratitude –
To form the words of the song of affection
(You are the poem of my life, 99).

Her love and affection for him are capped with the three children which she bore him. These make the poet/persona to burst into a song of her Oriki (praise name).

In spite of the fact of her being fifty years old, the poet asks for a dance to mark 'the beginning of our love' (101). This is however tempered by a little hint at death in the succeeding stanza through the use of the word 'eternal'. Yet eternity can only be attained after death:

Let us dance
Into the dawn
Of this eternal wedlock (You are the poem of my life, 101).

imagery of a mermaid living in the river, Obafemi casts women in the image of the temptress of greed which lives in the belly of corrupt leaders ('Big rivers'). He warns that this greed, if not checked, would eventually lead these corrupt men to doom:

Take heed then,
All ye Big Rivers
With seeming depths and unfathomable deeps
Take heed –
The mermaid in your belly
Shall drain you up to slits...
It is the Mermaid that dines in the river deeps
That belches up
The ignoble secrets of the River (The Mermaid Betrays, 72).

To counter the darkness implied in the 'seeming depths and unfathomable deeps' that harbour this greed, the poet advises the leaders to:

Open up then, can only be
When the sun's eye is lit up
In the bright skies,
The secret story of your reign,
And back it up with freedom
Right of access to the occult of your coded power
(The Mermaid Betrays, 72).

Woman as Destroyer

'Mother with Feet of Paddle' (56) portrays the mother as one that is also capable of destroying humanity.

Obafemi uses the lullaby that is used to rock a baby to sleep as introduction to the poem. Borrowing from the oral tale of the caring Mother Duck who leads her duck-lets from behind to protect them from 'black kites foraging the sky', the poem laments:

Who shall rescue the children of this land
From ravaging and rampaging mothers?
As the Ducks of this land
Ruin their Duck-lets from the front (Mother with Feet of Paddle 56).

Thus, the mothers have lost the paddles on their feet which they could use to guide their children.

The use of the lullaby which calls to mind the image of a caring mother in the background added to the image of a mother who has abandoned her children to become victims of 'ravaging kites' (56) sets the stage for the poet's call for the children to also abandon such uncaring mothers and take their destinies in their hands:

But if the mothers of this land
Turn prodigal and cavalier
If they will not learn from the ducks and be wise
Then let the duck-lets rise
Let the chickens
Rally, gather their wings
And fly to safety

Then,
Tomorrow,
They shall return
To mark their fathers' homes
With a curved and index fingers
Pointing only at themselves (Mother with Feet of Paddle, 56-57).

Conclusion

Obafemi in the selected text has depicted the woman both negatively and positively. This is in tandem with the emergent ideology. This also conforms to the African concept of gender and feminism. The fact that he borrows heavily from his Okun heritage – songs, proverbs, folktales in this collection may be said to be responsible for this relationship between the emergent ideology and with African feminism.

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