

Contemporary Nigerian Feminist Fiction and the Challenges of the African Woman

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Abstract

The feminist novel in Nigeria has recorded remarkable growth since the publication of Flora Nwapa's Efurú in 1966. Contemporary female writers, while building on the legacy of the foremothers, create more resilient, bold and resourceful characters who carve a niche for themselves in patriarchal society. Although the modern woman seeks complete emancipation from all forms of oppression and has achieved an appreciable level of success, it is the object of this paper to demonstrate that the African woman is still bedevilled with great challenges that have been adequately embodied in the contemporary female novel. The paper concludes that women need to explore new approaches towards attaining the desired liberation from subjugation.

Keywords: *Emancipation, Challenges, Strategy, Patriarchy, Oppression*

Introduction

A study of the feminist novel in Nigeria reveals that there is a visible change in the presentation of female characters in the first and second generations, and up to the contemporary coterie. Contemporary female writers seek to correct the impression of women as stereotypes, as we find in the works of the older Nigerian female writers. Typically, the current Nigerian female writer would seek to portray the female character as a normal, highly diversified and resourceful being that fits into many competitive roles which were mistakenly perceived to be the preserve of males. While drawing from the legacy and tenacity of the foremothers who were bold to foreground the plight of the woman in patriarchal society, these female writers question the allotted role given to the woman in the domestic sphere, the position of the woman as the man's appendage thereby unveiling 'the socio-cultural structures of the Nigerian society and create new spaces for young Nigerian women to inhabit' (Shalini p. 22). The second-generation female writers gave women a voice through education and financial empowerment, hence, contemporary female writers build on this legacy and seek to explore new avenues that would help to better the cause of the Nigerian woman. Inasmuch as the writers continue to educate, inform and enlighten the woman to fight for her rights, they reveal through their works that the woman is no longer the voiceless 'Other' that is contented with her marginality. In other words, the woman is successful in her career and is at the forefront of leading other women to achieve their goals. Akung has rightly observed that 'the Nigerian woman now has a name of her own and she no longer feels any pride when her identity is tied to the man' (p. 115). The woman no longer feels neglected because she participates actively in all spheres of the society and also seeks new avenues for self-fulfilment. Although the female characters show their resourcefulness in a male-dominated society and have a say on issues that pertain to them, it is pertinent to note that the modern woman is still faced with challenges that inhibit her progress.

New Dimensions of Oppression

In spite of whatever progress that has been made towards the emancipation of the female in the Nigerian society, the oppression of this category of persons in contemporary society is still prevalent and the woman is still often subjected to physical and psychological abuse. Nevertheless, the awareness already generated has enabled the women

to reduce the brazenness the abuse of the rights of women as we find in the writings of Nigeria's second generation female writers. For instance, Beatrice in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Ama's mother in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* are in a hopeless and abusive marriage and yet remain because of the perceived attendant insecurity that will occur when they leave the marriage. Nonetheless, the society does not know that the women are enduring life-threatening abuse. Eugene is a philanthropist and a religious fanatic. He is highly respected in his church and exhibits a high sense of humility when his contribution to the growth of his church parish is announced. His philanthropic activities earn him international recognition. His country home is usually a beehive of activities as members of the community come to him for financial assistance. His traditional title, Omelora, which means, 'the one who does for the community' is in recognition of the numerous contributions he has made towards the development of his community. Despite the good reputation that Eugene earns, the members of the society are oblivious of the physical and psychological abuse that he subjects his family to. It will be a shocking revelation to his church members, the villagers and the general public when they learn of the atrocities that he commits in his home. Unfortunately, Beatrice and his children have been cowed into silence and submission that stems from fear. Beatrice does not protest when she is physically battered nor does she stop him from doing same to the children, Kambili and Jaja. She only nurses them to recovery after every episode of violence. Even when she regains her freedom by killing Eugene using poison, the brutality that they endure remains a secret. Aunty Ifeoma and her children only get to know about Eugene's brutal hold on his family when Beatrice suffers a miscarriage and Kambili suffers a near-fatal beating. Similarly, Ama's mother in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* endures humiliation and violence in the hands of her husband, Brother Cyril. He wears white cloth as a mark of his religious purity and is the assistant pastor whose religious fervency is highly commended in the church. Ama's mother:

had to boil the clothes that the assistant pastor on his way to becoming pastor has to wear so that his purity glowed, the way she walked with her back hunched when the clothes did not come out clean enough and Brother Cyril, who did not tolerate shortcomings and wanted them all 'to

make it to heaven' expiated her sin with a beating. (*On Black Sisters' Street* p. 124).

Ama is sexually abused by her step-father, Brother Cyril, at the tender age of eight. When Ama eventually discloses the secret to her mother, she refuses to believe her. Brother Cyril is placated when Ama is sent to stay with her aunt, Mama Eko, in Lagos and her mother pleads on her knees. These men hide under the garb of religiosity to perpetrate evil.

Further, the woman undergoes marital rape. In Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* (2010), the wives of Baba Segi recount their experiences with him. The belief in patriarchal societies is that the woman is meant to ensure that the man is sexually satisfied and the feelings of the woman are not taken into consideration. Bolanle, one of the wives, recounts her experience:

Now there was no pleasure in the pleasing, no sweetness in the surrender. Baba Segi only comes to deposit his seed in my womb. He doesn't smile or tickle me. He doesn't make jokes about my youth; he just rams me into the mattress... he returned at midnight to hammer me like never before.... It was as if he wanted to make it clear, with every thrust that he didn't make light of his husbandly duties.... If there was ever a moment that when the memory of being raped became fresh in my mind, that was it. (*Secret Lives* 43-44)

In relation to marital rape is the acceptance of polygamy which Orabueze refers to as a 'cultural practice that humiliates the Nigerian woman and brings her heartache in her incarceration' (p. 87). The wives in a polygamous setting try to outsmart each other in gaining the man's attention and 'love' which leads to petty jealousies, viciousness and intrigues. The polygamous home does not give room for the woman to assert her individuality because she is preoccupied with working towards pleasing the man. Iya Segi and Iya Femi do not relent in ensuring that Bolanle is sent packing by their husband because of the secret that has been kept for years. The women accuse Bolanle of putting charm in Baba Segi's room. When all efforts to make Bolanle

leave prove futile, they decide to kill her by giving her poisoned food. Bolanle innocently gives the food to Segi which she eats and it leads to Segi's painful and untimely death. Sheri, in Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* grows in a polygamous home where peace prevails. There is mutual understanding and respect among the wives, a situation which creates a favourable environment for them to attend to their businesses. Through this portrayal, Atta asserts that the hitherto perception that women are their own worst enemies can be refuted when women refuse to be drawn into a battle that will retard their progress which will in turn be to the man's advantage. It is pertinent to note that the female characters, that is Beatrice, Ama's Mother, Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi refuse to talk about the oppression that they endure because they are not conscious of the fact that they can assert their rights and dignity, hence their inability to break free from the yoke of male subjugation. Corroborating this view, Orabueze writes that 'gender silences in the face of oppression and brutalisation are contributory factors to the erection and sustenance of the walls of imprisonment of the individual in the Nigerian society' (p. 96).

Another dimension of oppression revealed in the texts is silence. The educated men use silence as a weapon which eventually stifles the woman's voice. These men feel that due to their educational status, resorting to physical violence as a way of oppressing the woman is demeaning, hence the use of psychological abuse as a form of punishment for the 'erring' woman. Sunny Taiwo in Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* uses silence to frustrate his wife, Ariola, in the home. He also ignores his wife in public functions. The tension that builds between them as a result of the discovery of the infidelity leads to an uncomfortable silence. Although Ariola decides to take solace in church, the silence and animosity between them eventually leads to divorce. Niyi also resorts to silence in the form of malice in order to cow Enitan into submission. He is not in support of Enitan's involvement in activism and her moves towards ensuring her father's release from detention. When his attempts to stop Enitan fail, he punished her by refusing any form of conversation between them. Enitan decides to leave the marriage when she becomes fed up with the situation. Another form of silence is the type that is forced on the woman by the oppressor by instilling fear. Beatrice and her children are silenced in their home by Eugene's tyrannical control. Kambili and Jaja speak with their spirits

and facial expressions. Beatrice speaks 'like the bird eats' and in whispers. The years of enduring violence from her husband reduces her to a shadow in her home. The use of silence by these men tallies with the patriarchal notion that the woman should be seen and not heard.

New Challenges

We can say with considerable justification that of all the challenges faced by the modern woman, the most prominent is the issue of motherhood. The woman is perceived to be incomplete if she is unable to bear children. Her femininity is defined by her ability to procreate. The woman becomes worried and desperate if she is unable to bear a child. She then explores all avenues to prove her fertility. Baba Segi's wives in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* decide to prove their fertility by indulging in marital infidelity. Iya Segi, the first wife, is forced to drink concoctions when she is unable to get pregnant after two years of marriage. When she realises that the concoctions are not yielding the desired results, she lures her husband's driver, Taju, to bed and this leads to the birth of her two children, Segi and Akin. She shares her secret with Iya Tope and Iya Femi when they become married to Baba Segi and they also get a man to impregnate them. These women refuse to seek medical help because they have accepted the patriarchal notion that the woman is to be blamed when a couple is faced with the challenge of infertility. Enitan in Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and Ezi in Unigwe's *Night Dancer* become worried when they are unable to get pregnant. Rather than resort to unwholesome ways of proving their femininity, they decide to seek medical help which eventually yields positive results. Although they are concerned about the problem, they, just like Bolanle in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, are enlightened through education, they know their rights and refuse to be cowed into submission and timidity because of the problem of infertility. However, in situations where it is medically proven that the woman cannot bear children, she seeks other ways of contributing to the development of her society thereby finding self-fulfilment. Sheri in Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* initially feels incomplete as a result of her barrenness which is caused by a crude abortion carried out on her after she is raped. She decides to become Brigadier Hassan's mistress because he will not bother about her inability to give birth since he already has a family. When she breaks the relationship due to Hassan's overbearing attitude, she starts a Non-Governmental Organisation

which caters for indigent children. She establishes businesses that are successful and finds fulfilment in them. The actions of these women reveal that:

societal constructs set motherhood and procreation as the woman's major sources of fulfilment, but contemporary African women are seeking new avenues for self-fulfilment, arguing that it is now untenable, obnoxious and unacceptable that womanhood is validated only through motherhood and procreation (Iniobong 86).

Another challenge that the modern woman has to grapple with is that of merging and managing her roles effectively as a career woman and a mother. Inasmuch as the woman desires to be successful in her chosen career, she still has the responsibility of ensuring that the home front does not suffer neglect. In other words, her success should not be at the detriment of her family. Enitan resigns from her job as a company secretary when her much-sought pregnancy is threatened due to stress. She then decides to manage her father's law firm and his other business interests which are less demanding. She displays good managerial skills during her father's unlawful detention. Her mother, Ariola, also resigns from her job in order to take proper care of her family especially her son that suffers from sickle cell anaemia. Ifeoma, in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, proves that the woman can be successful at both the public and private sphere by ensuring that both are effectively managed. As an academic and a widow, she single-handedly caters for and raises her three children. She is bold and assertive and seeks for ways of improving their living conditions by looking for another job in America which she eventually gets at the end. Ifeoma instills discipline and a sense of decorum in her children and yet ensures that they are responsible, obedient and exude self-confidence. Ifeoma symbolises the truly emancipated African woman that exhibits a high sense of independence and is successful as a worker and a mother. In spite of the harsh economic conditions that she undergoes, she refuses to succumb to Eugene's tyrannical control and the conditions for giving her financial assistance.

This brings us to a discussion of another disturbing aspect of the issue of

motherhood in contemporary society: the 'absent mother'. This is a situation whereby the mother is not physically and emotionally present to care for her children as a result of the challenges that she is confronted with and the abuse that she suffers. The woman is overwhelmed by the demands of her society and fails to nurture the mother-child relationship. Beatrice in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Constance in *Imagine This*, Ama's mother in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, Mama Ofunne in *Sky-High Flames* and Ariola in *Everything Good Will Come* are physically present but emotionally detached from their children. Beatrice fails to teach her children how to fight against and resist violence and does not protest when Eugene physically abuse Kambili and Jaja because she is overwhelmed by the abuse that she suffers. Victoria Ariola grieves from the loss of her son and is shocked when she discovers her husband's marital unfaithfulness after twenty years. She does not engage in a meaningful discussion with her daughter; rather, she accuses Enitan of taking sides with her father. Mama Ofunne succumbs to her husband's patriarchal control and joins him in ensuring that Ofunne lives according to the dictates and beliefs of her society. Constance is both physically and emotionally absent because she leaves her marriage in order to avoid the physical abuse that she suffers. Ama's mother turns a blind eye to her husband's abusive and violent tendencies. She also fails to believe her daughter, Ama, when she tells her that Brother Cyril sexually abuses her.

These women are not bothered about the emotions and wellbeing of their children because they are also struggling to gain freedom and find their selfhood. Owing to the absence of these mothers, the protagonists seek help from other women and bond with them in order to discover their inner strength and find fulfilment. Rather than wallow in self-pity and resign to fate like their mothers, they find solace in the hands of women that are truly emancipated and refuse to adhere to the rules of their patriarchal society. Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* realises the abnormality in her home as a result of Ifeoma and Amaka's tutelage. Little wonder she resents her mother when she regains consciousness in the hospital after the near-fatal beating she suffers in the hands of Eugene and asks to be allowed to recuperate in Aunty Ifeoma's home. She knows that her mother does not possess the will to protect her from her father's brutality. She gradually becomes bold to express herself and is able to make critical decisions for her family after the sudden demise

of her father. Enitan bonds with her neighbour, Sheri, and later Grace Ameh, a journalist and human rights activists. These relationships enable her to develop her inner strength and air her feelings about the happenings in the society. Ofunne in *Sky-High Flames* finds solace in the arms of Sister Dolan who encourages her to further her education and not to be deterred by forced early marriage. Ifemelu's mother in Adichie's *Americanah* is overwhelmed by the pressure of catering for the needs of her family when her husband loses his job and she is also preoccupied with her religious activities without giving any room to improve on her relationship with her daughter. The relationship that Ifemelu develops with Auntu Uju and Obinze's mother affords her the opportunity to learn more about herself as a woman and what is expected of her as a modern African woman. These relationships show that the women can only succeed and achieve their goals when they come together to have a common front to fight every form of oppression.

Apart from thematic parallels, contemporary female Nigerian novelists employ unique stylistic devices that differentiate them from the first and second generation writers. One of the prominent devices is the use of the first-person narrative. The events are seen through the eyes of the female protagonist and are unravelled with a touch of the protagonist's innocence thereby making it easy to identify with the emotions and plight of the character. The narrator's struggle for dignity and identity in the face of male domination, economic, social and political instability are portrayed from a realistic point of view, hence, the reader's ability to view the society from the woman's angle. Unlike the previous female writers that portrayed a society that they wished for the woman, contemporary female writers reveal the struggles of woman in the real society and the strategies that she adopts in order to surmount the challenges. Adichie, through the eyes of the teenage protagonist, Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, portrays the Nigerian society that is plagued with the problems of military dictatorship, strikes, economic hardship and social instability. She uses Eugene Achike's family as a microcosm of the unfavourable society that makes life unbearable for the woman. Atta in *Everything Good Will Come* captures the growth of a young protagonist from childhood to adulthood in a politically unstable country. While revealing the social and political problems of the larger society through the eyes of Enitan, she portrays the personal struggles of

the women and how these affect the family and the larger society. All these show that contemporary female writers are not only concerned about the plight of the woman and how they gain agency, but are interested in portraying the events in their society in a bid to effect the desired change.

Another technique used is the birth of a girl-child as against the preference for a male-child in patriarchal societies. Contrary to the perceived notion that the girl-child is not physically equipped to cope with the demands of the society, hence, her inability to contribute meaningfully to its development, the protagonists in the works in focus here are, in most cases, an only child or the only daughter among other siblings. Enitan is an only child after the demise of her only brother at a tender age. She is able to effectively manage her father's law firm and other businesses during his unlawful detention. She gives birth to a girl and names her Yimika. Ezi, in Unigwe's *Night Dancer* gives birth to a girl, Mma, after being childless for some years in her marriage. When her family members show preference for the male-child that her husband has through his sexual misconduct with their housemaid, Ezi divorces her husband and opts to be a single mother in defiance of her family's disapproval. Olanna and Kainene in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* are the only twin daughters of Chief Ozobia. Kainene proves her dexterity in managing her father's business and earns the respect of her father's friends. One of them, Chief Okonji, says, 'Whoever said you lost out by having twin daughters is a liar.' Chief Ozobia affirms that 'Kainene is not just like a son, she is like two' (*Half of a Yellow Sun* 32). The confirmation by her father is aimed at debunking the erroneous view that male children are more important and useful than the female children.

Added to these is the unbiased portrayal in contemporary Nigerian feminist novel. Unlike the first-generation writers that portray female characters that are infallible and male characters that are 'ne'er-dowells', female characters with negative influences and behaviour are portrayed alongside the positive characters. The juxtaposition of the characters reveals that the writers tell the woman's story without bias. Baba Segi's wives, IyaSegi and Iya Femi, in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* show their vindictiveness when they device dangerous ways of ensuring that Bolanle leaves the family. The women falsely accuse Bolanle of putting a fetish object aimed at killing Baba

Segi in the room. When all their plans fail to yield the desired results, they decide to kill her by poisoning her food. Ironically, their vindictiveness leads to the painful death of Segi, IyaSegi's only daughter, when she eats the food meant for Bolanle. The wives also engage in extramarital affairs in order to prove their fertility thereby living a life of falsehood and deceit until the secrets are unravelled. Auntu Uju, Ranyinudo, Adesuwa and Uche in Adichie's *Americanah* are mistresses of rich married men and are in such relationships for financial and material gain. Ifemelu also has a sexual relationship with her ex-boyfriend, Obinze, though she is aware that he is married. These women cause unfair hardship to their fellow women.

Conclusion

The modern African woman has made giant strides in asserting herself and charting the course for herself in patriarchal society. Nonetheless, the challenges she faces reveal that she is yet to attain her full selfhood. The modern woman needs to devise other ways of coping with the new forms of oppression. Although some of the characters adopt survival strategies that yield positive results, the study reveals that complete emancipation from male subjugation and oppression in contemporary society has not been achieved.

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