

# BETWEEN ELKANAH AND THE CONTEMPORARY MALE: HISTORY, HER (STORY) AND THE DEMYTHIFICATION OF OTHERNESS IN OSAMMOR'S THE TRIUMPH OF THE WATER LILY.

IMOH ABANG EMENYI

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## ABSTRACT

The insistence on social construction of roles for the sexes has for centuries privileged the male human person while the female is conceived as the Other. This work examines the concept of otherness and uses Stella Osammor's *The Triumph of the Water Lily* to propose a new direction for gender relations in Africa.

## KEYWORDS:

- Elkanah:** The husband of Hannah and Penninah in 1 Samuel, Chapter one. He represents the male legacy in literature or the male response to reality.
- Myths:** The beliefs and norms of a people which are often exploited by the status quo to oppress or marginalize a segment of the society.
- Demythify:** The process of explaining, destroying and correcting the falsehood which goes with myths.
- Otherness:** The act of conferring a second class status on a person and the insistence on confining that individual to the realm of irrationality.
- Sex Difference:** The use of biological differences between male and female to fragment humanity along gender roles.

## INTRODUCTION

It is when starting to speak that one becomes 'I'. This act – the becoming of the subject through the exercise of language and through location – in order to be real, implies that the locator be an absolute subject (Witting 66).

African cosmology conceives present life as having continuous link with the past and future modes of existence. This cyclic aesthetics is manifested in the literature of most societies, not in terms that are uniquely African but through recurrent images, characters, norms and myths that constitute aspects of human behaviour. Elkanah is an archetypal male in Judeo - Christian theology who embodies in the broadest sense the strict binary construction historically associated with gender signification.

In interrogating the gendered nature of heterosexual relationship between Elkanah and Hannah, Robyn Wiegman's and Elena Glasberg's comment offers useful insights on the interplay between sex and gender differentiation. This is their argument:

Does it necessarily follow that because human bodies are capable of different things that

social roles and responsibilities must also be different? This question has serious implications when we consider not just the idea that gender = sex, but the use to which that

idea has been put in the organisation of the society 4).

These issues are fundamental to gender studies in Africa, especially since the society designs and assigns gender roles. It gives prominence to male traits by placing men in public space as authority figures but subordinates the female by fixing women in domestic space as nurturers of life.

This "sexual division of labour" is a major component of patriarchy as a social system which allows men to exploit their privileged position in the society to oppress and suppress women. Female exploitation results from the belief that reproduction is the primary function of women; and so it is both venerated and vilified, depending on the situation. In Africa, infertility is an abnormality particularly for married women because it disrupts the cosmic cycle. Eric Ayisi corroborates this point when he divulges that marriage without children does not form a family since a "family consists of a man, his wife and child or children" (15). Consequently, a childless woman is readily branded a useless person, for the society sees

her as someone who has failed in her most important function.

This is Amaka's experience in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*. This same situation informs Hannah's "bitterness of soul" as she weeps continually from the provocation of her co-wife, Peninnah. And since patriarchy concedes to men privileges which women are denied, the same culture which promotes female chastity accepts male sexual escapades. It is within this framework that Emilia Oko critiques the narrow morality which condemns female adultery but sanctions male sexual gregariousness while insisting that morality is that "truth to self that at the same time does not deny the autonomy of the other" (6).

This "narrow morality" has made childlessness an exclusively female problem in Africa. It is not surprising, therefore, that the writer of *1 Samuel* paints a vivid picture of the traumas of barrenness on Hannah without a corresponding reference to Elkanah. This suggests that he is free from this "reproach". And so, between the "first years of the monarchy in Israel" when Geoffrey Chapman speculates as the period when the *Books of Samuel* were written (163) and now, the patterns of gender relations have not changed significantly. The female is burdened by tradition. Literature has remained the primary medium for exploring the complexities of gender because it is inextricably linked with the culture which produces it. This work examines the female in literature as a male creation and uses Stella Osammor's *The Triumph of the Water Lily* to reconstruct her (story) in African literature.

## HISTORY, HER (STORY) AND THE FEMALE IN LITERATURE

The place of women in history has been a subject of debate because as Kerber et al report, the "grand narratives that we have inherited, built as they were on the assumption that men's experience is normative and women's experience is trivial... (6). This explains why women's history did not gain acceptability as an academic discipline until the late 1960s. As members of the minority group, Gerda Lerner writing from her experience in the United States reveals that women were "severally restricted in access to training, in financial support, in professional networking, and in their participation in the professional organisations" (446).

Here in Africa, the debate to include women's experience in mainstream history is on-going. Again, Lerner traces this phenomenon to the "world-historical tendency to deny women access to their own past, even their own recent past" (Kerber et al, 12). But this does not discountenance them as a formidable force in African history; a fact which, as Olaudah Equiano shows, dates back to the eighteenth century. In his slave narrative, Equiano presents African women as "uncommonly graceful, alert, and modest to a degree of bashfulness". But he adds that women in Essaka (Benin) are not excluded from war and so, everybody is taught to use weapons. He states categorically that

"even our women are warriors, and march boldly out to fight along with the men" (11).

This fact is confirmed by Zulu Sofola in her research on the status of women in pre-colonial Africa; an inquiry which produces her historical play *Queen Omu-Ako of Oligbo* and her theory on the "de-womanisation" of African womanhood. In the latter, she identifies parallel lines of power and authority "among the Igbos, West of the Niger and Onitsha, East of the Niger" and uses this as the basis of her study on dual-sex power structure in Africa (55-6). Sofola's thesis is that African women are not as weak as the contemporary elites portray, but that they have been de-womanised by Eurocentric modes of self definition.

Ama Ata Aidoo validates Sofola's position when she posits that "the daughters of Africa... are descended from some of the bravest, most independent, and most innovative women this world has ever known" (39). Her reference points are women historical figures, monarchs and power models who confronted colonial repression in traditional African societies. Nzingha of Angola (1582-1663) fought against the Portuguese occupation of ancient Benin just as the Queen of Ashanti in Ghana led an insurrection against the British. Aidoo's roll-call of women power figures also pays tribute to "Igbo women of Eastern Nigeria, who in the 1920s so successfully harassed the British that the colonial administration had to move its headquarters from Calabar to Lagos" (41).

The point Aidoo is making here is that Nigerian women are prime movers of history and not spectators. But in order to put the records straight, this incident is a specific reference to the nationwide demonstration against increase in taxation from the colonial administration in 1929. That demonstration resulted in riots in three locations - Bendel, Aba and Ikot Abasi, but the first two were not as massive as what happened at Ikot Abasi in terms of the level of destruction. Yet what popular history seems to gloss over is the fact that all the women who died in that crisis were Ibibio women from Ikot Abasi. However, the panel that investigated that riot sat at Aba, which may be why the valiant action of Ibibio women in the war between Ikot Abasi women and the colonial administration is subsumed within the larger struggle that is often presented as an Igbo women's affair. It is now time to address Ikot Abasi Women's Riot of 1929 as distinct from the Aba Women's Riot in order to correct the distortion of history which gives credit to Igbo women only for a war which Ibibio women fought and paid the supreme sacrifice in defence of their rights.

The major issue here is that women's self assertion is not an imported phenomenon. In fact, there is a rational potential in all human beings to impose meaning on chaos; Ikot Abasi women's Riot is a Nigerian example. Whether in Africa, Asia or Europe, women are makers of history. This explains why Fatima Mernissi probes the exclusion of Muslim women from political history, dismissing it as a fantasy of the male elites. She cites A'isha, Prophet Mohammed's wife who challenged the legitimacy of the fourth orthodox Caliph, Ali Ibn Abi Talib in a war called "The Battle of the

Carmel" in *The Veil and the Male Elite*. Again, in *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, she investigates the Hadith to unravel the deeds of women aristocrats, especially women of the Qurashi aristocracy, who like Hind Bint Utba were critical enough to resist oppression in their society.

Therefore, Mernissi blames the portrait of Muslim women as mutilated creatures on the "strange memory" of the male elites who develop a false Hadith or a fabricated tradition in order to stop women from seeking for political rights (8). The insistence of the male elites on removing women from public space is also seen in the Christian world. In Africa, for instance, the encounter with the West introduced the idea of the woman as "the angel of the house" into African gender relations. As such men were empowered to name creation, including women. This is why Simone de Beauvoir insists that "humanity is male and man defines the woman not in herself but as relative to him..." (16).

Consequently, production gives men the position of conquerors while reproduction compels women to serve their needs. It is for this reason, Okereke opines in her analysis of the nature of colonial education, that black women both in Africa and the Diaspora have "become late comers on the political, economic and literary spheres" (1581). The subordinate status given to women in life is reflected in literature which is the medium for recreating social meaning. It follows that men writers define women in their creative works basically as wives, mothers, prostitutes or courtesans.

The obvious fact about these roles is the idea of the woman in the service of man - a plaything. According to Theodora Ezeigbo, the exploitation of women is because the society believes that "a woman's body makes the woman" (8). This accounts for the prostitutes and courtesans in Achebe's *A Man of the People and Anthills of the Savannah*; and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*; the daughters of Eve in Soyinka's *The Trial of Brother Jero* and *The Interpreters*; and the tempting seductress in Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*. (For a detailed presentation of women in African Literature, see Kenneth Little's work on the subject). These portraits of women affirms Oko's remark that men writers "lack the natural capacity to make women the centre of sustained meaningful enquiry" (31). This may be why men writers cover their women characters with myths. It is this male vision which justifies Moira Monteith's assertion that "One of the immense positive gains accruing from feminist criticism has been the realization that the female in literature is a literary construct" (1).

Myth, as Mary Kolawole explains "embodies the non-rational prevalent traditional sets of beliefs, thoughts and practices which guide a society's interpersonal and collective values, mores, moral codes and social norms" (3). And so, myth in men's writing is used to present women as one dimensional creature of patriarchy. Simon Gikandi attests to this when he remarks that myths "have actually been naturalised by the dominant culture or class to justify its hegemony" (150).

Thus, myth "provides the *raison d'etre* for gender inequality, oppression and diverse harmful practices against or involving women" (Kolawole 3). Mikhail Bakhtin's "law of placement" can be used to illuminate the position of women in literary works created by men. As Michael Holquist writes in *Dialogism, Bakhtin and his World*, this law states that "...the meaning of whatever is observed, is shaped by the place from which it is perceived" (2). Therefore, men and women writers and critics speak from their distinct positions in the social system.

#### THE DEMYTHIFICATION OF OTHERNESS IN OSAMMOR'S NOVEL

Since the male critical theory fails to grapple realistically with the female experience, treating it as the "inessentials," feminist scholars have developed agenda aimed at challenging and reconstructing otherness. This concept is first discussed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. The common agenda of feminist scholars is "relocating the definition of self out of a male perspective to a female perspective (Haste 101). This is why metaphors of rationality are associated with the male while those of chaos are assumed to be the prerogative of the female. In this scenario, Haste further explains that the female is cast "as the antithesis, the negation and most particularly as the other. The other is not just different, it is antithetical" (5).

The problem of otherness has a vital link with women's economic powerlessness which, according to Ebele Eko and Imoh Emenyi, "polished male voices to tell female stories and patriarchy has given authority to these tales" (170). But the exposure to Western education has given women the rationale to possess their destiny through speech. Therefore, the emergence of women in intellectual space has exploded the grandest of all myths which states that women have mouth to chatter only in domestic space but outside that sphere of experience, they are dumb. Grace Okereke's article on "African Gender Myths of Vocality and Gender Dialogue in African Literature" interrogates this phenomenon using the Beti (Cameroon) proverb which says that "women have no mouth"(133).

The reality of this proverb is recaptured in Femi Ojo-Ade's assertion that "African Literature is a male-created, male dominated chauvinistic art" (158). This male-created vision muffled the female voice for decades because she was conceived as the muted species. In Okereke's analysis of the myth of silence as a female virtue, she asserts that the "loss of voice as a character in male authored [works] attests to the male-serving monologicistic conception of the female gender" (147). This explains the intervention by women writers in the definition of women in African Literature. Beginning with Flora Nwapa whom Imo Eshiet describes as a "disruptive pathfinder in a male dominated literature" (21), African women intellectuals have set masculine conception of women at defiance.

The task of recreating the female as subject,

Anne Hermann comments, implies deconstructing "the power relations which reserve the position of the other for women and the position of the object for the woman who is represented" (7). This is why Stella Osammor's centralization of the female experience in *The Triumph of the Water Lily* decentres the male voice as absolute. Female creativity as I have said in "Human Rights and Women's Creativity..." "is a challenge to male authority. This is the point Diane Herndl has made in her remark that "to speak at all is to assume authority" because the female voice "laughs in the face of male authority" (11).

Thus, Osammor's vision attains prominence in feminist discourse not just for her readiness to recognise sex difference and the ability to choose when to "deny, celebrate, or dislodge difference," to borrow the words of Deborah Rhode (9). The importance of Osammor's novel lies in her development of a framework which in Estella B. Freeman's analysis on sexual difference "neither uncritically embraces nor overcritically rejects ideas about male/female difference". As such, Osammor cultivates a position that "recognizes gender variations without enforcing them" (257). This position is currently lacking in contemporary feminist scholarship both in Africa and Europe.

*The Triumph of the Water Lily* tells the story of a young man, Odili, and his wife, Nkem, who share beautiful moments together though they are childless seven years after marriage. But when Nkem sees the pressures on her husband to marry another wife, she devises "an alternative strategy to tackle a paradoxical and difficult dilemma" which she describes as "an experiment" (10). This "experiment" consists in her vacating her matrimonial home so that the woman who will carry Odili's children may have adequate protection. By this action, she voluntarily abandons her role (as a wife) within the confines of tradition in order to adopt another personality - that of an independent woman. Though both Nkem and Odili agree to the fact that they share "something special" which societal pressures should not destroy yet Nkem values her selfhood above social definition. This is why she refuses to be "a derelict and pitiful wife who is left in the home dejected and embittered and only in possession of the wedding ring and not the man himself" (11).

The decision to move out of Odili's home is first an act of self-assertion, Nkem's means of insisting on her personal responsibility to life and happiness. But this act of self-determinism does not only provide an independent atmosphere for her to re-design her existence, it also preserves her love for Odili and vice versa. It does permit Comfort to enter Odili's life with the hope of bearing his child and so releases the tension that has threatened to crush Nkem's relationship with Odili. Yet Nkem is very much in charge though the prospect of a baby from Comfort is devastating. Nkem, nevertheless, determines what to do with power and uses it maturely because her relationship with God offers her the confidence to explore the limitless possibilities in life. But when Odili's new relationship threatens his emotional stability and physical security, Nkem intervenes by taking him on a

trip to London where he recuperates.

This trip offers them an opportunity to define themselves above collective strictures. There comes the awareness that marriage is not a social obligation; but a responsibility to fulfil personal desires within the context of group experience, and as such validates the right to independent action. The *modus operandi*, is "patient-endurance" as the compressed summary of Nkem's strategy for survival shows:

I was only trying to bend, in the storm, so that it wouldn't break us. Now that the tide has washed over us, Odili and I are learning to stand upright again, like the rice stalk does, after a turbulent storm (158).

This experience provides a pedestal for the fulfilment of Nkem's dream of mothering Odili's son, Julian Onyiye - Chukwu-Diuso which in Igbo means "the gift of God is delightful". In other words, the decision to rescue Odili from self-destruction constitutes Nkem's greatest act of self-assertion, and later self-fulfilment.

Although Nkem dies, eighteen months after realising her ambition, she dies assuring her husband and friends that she has found fulfilment. And so, in life, she is graceful and courageous just as she is calm and confident in death. Though initially heart-ridden, her husband gradually overcomes the traumatic experience which comes with her demise because of the beautiful memories he has about her life and his unconditional support during her illness. Having fulfilled his obligations to Nkem despite the threats from the social system, Odili repudiates the concept of love as being tradition-bound. Unlike Elkanah, this search for fulfilment is not gender specific; rather, it is a commitment to defend his personal convictions, which include his *choice* to marry Nkem.

Thus, the relationship he has with Nkem accepts sex difference as a critical aspect of life but it does not constrain their lives. They treat each other with mutual respect, which is why childlessness affects them on equal terms. The harmony they exude despite the problems of life emanates from their conviction that with God and personal determination, no situation is insurmountable. This peaceful existence is not only applicable to Nkem and Odili, it is manifested in the relationship between Effua and Norman; Effua's mother and father; Effua and Odili; Effua and her colleagues and in the way both genders interact in this novel.

The suggestion is that gender is alive but it should not be exploited to destroy humanity. Even de Beauvoir at the end of her multi-generic study of sex difference admitted that "no physiological destiny imposes an eternal hostility upon male and female", meaning that the "Eternal Feminine" and the "Eternal Masculine" are vague essences (725-6). This is where Grace Okereke's essay, "The Three Ideologies of Gender" can be used to examine gender discourse in Africa. She sees the feminist movement as a reactionary ideology which grows out to the patriarchal ideology and proposes that only the divine ideology of

gender is capable of checking the problems generated by feminism and patriarchy as "diseased ideologies" (19).

According to Okereke, "when a man and woman become educated through experience in the divine ideology of gender, the self/other oppositional construct dissolves into a polyphonic consciousness" (19). The relationship between Nkem and Odili as well as Effua and Norman is typical of this. Thus, the genders are mutually relevant and should co-exist for the development of humanity. This point is the subject of my work on "Gender and culture Dialogue..." where I posit that the "plurality which the merging of the male and female viewpoints bring to life establishes that there is a dialectical connection between the gendered voices" (138). And so, it is imperative to recognize sex difference without enforcing it since this is a primary avenue for developing a multivocal approach to human epistemology.

## CONCLUSION

Between Elkanah and the contemporary male, the genders have been cast in opposition to each other. This is because the patriarchal ideology which is upheld by men disfigure women by configuring them through myths. In reaction, feminism has used the female talent to confront tradition as the basis of men's power and women's subservience (See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guba, 1986). Consequently, the "sexual-literary struggle" which develops from the appropriation of speech through the search for self-determinism by women has pitched the genders against each other in intellectual space, with both parties plagued by varying degrees of "insecurity consciousness."

Stella Osammor's *The Triumph of the Water Lily* is one of the first attempts at affirming sex difference and transcending the acrimony which the insistence on gender roles as social constructs bring upon heterosexual relationships. In the process, she has de-feminised poverty by creating economically independent women who cultivate a dignified existence in their relationship with men; women who transcend Amaka's fractured personality in *One is Enough* and Aissatou's individualism in *So Long A Letter*. She has also produced the "liberated" male, a powerful man who chooses to use power to design a better world for others and not to oppress. This re-interpretation of gender roles signals a new phase in African literature as Osammor's novel introduces men and women who are determined to insist on their humanity by placing personal responsibility to self above social obligations into the African literary scene.

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