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Responding to the Challenge: Feminist Consciousness in *Breaking the Silence: An Anthology of Short Stories*

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Abstract

Female writing in Nigeria was once a rarity with only Nwapa, Emecheta, Sofola, or Segun breaking the monotony of male literary creativity. Recently however, female writing has blossomed and become as expected as male writing, if not more so, because of the special challenge peculiar to female writers. This paper shows the influence of the feminist literary theory on contemporary female writing in Nigeria. Using some stories from the anthology Breaking the Silence: An Anthology of short stories (1996), the paper posits that female writers in Nigeria have taken up the challenge of their expected acquiescence and silence (as expressed in Little, 1980, for example). These writers have demonstrated that female writing can be feminist (i.e. advocating female rights) without being antagonistic or confrontational.

Introduction

Until recently, historical antecedents had conspired to make female writing a rarity in Africa. Whereas Philis Wheatley, an African-American lady, published her *Poems on various subjects* in 1773, female writing on the African continent itself would two centuries later still be a novelty. Probably the most important debilitating factor would be traditional beliefs. Granted that Africa acquired western education (the prerequisite for writing modern literature) late, when she eventually did, the female sex was excluded. It is already well-known that even now in the 21st century, many "traditional" Africans see no value in the education of girls and women. The argument, untenable as it is, is that a girl takes her education to her husband's house.

This dominance of the male sex is to pervade almost every sphere of human activity. So, not surprisingly, African literature ultimately portrayed male-dominated societies, in which women became mere appendages: as wives to be bullied, and help the man preserve his lineage, or as daughters to be given away in marriage. Such was the picture when modern African literature began in earnest in the 1950s. As Kenneth Little points out, the portraiture of African women in urban literature was more negative than positive. He shows the chauvinistic nature of this portrayal by his classification of the female characters in the texts he studied: as girlfriends and good-time girls, free women, mothers, courtesans and prostitutes, and as political workers.

Apart from Little, African literary critics have, themselves recognized the male-dominated nature of their literature. Femi Ojo-Ade notes that "African

literature is a male-created and male-dominated chauvinist art" and Chikwenye Okonji-Ogunyemi charges Nigerian literature of being "[p]hallic dominated with male writers and critics, dealing almost exclusively with male characters and concerns naturally aimed at a predominantly male audience." These and other similar charges by Rose Acholonu, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie and Mabel Segun, for example, have challenged African women into balancing the image that emerges of women in African literature. Little had wondered why it was so difficult to find a more positive image of women in African literature when in real life such women existed. Until this trend is reversed, he posits, "the charge of male chauvinism may be difficult to rebut. Here then is the challenge … that needs to be faced by female authors especially". It is this challenge, this expected silence that the Women Writers of Nigeria set out to meet, and to break. *Breaking the Silence* (1996) is therefore a response to the overwhelming imbalance in the ratio of male/female writing in Nigeria.

Feminism

Any discussion of female writing ultimately provokes a discussion of feminism in literature especially if it is felt that the authors have used their art to further the cause of the female sex. It is important to emphasize however that female writing is not necessarily feminist writing. Feminism after all, presupposes an advocacy of female rights.

Delmar quotes Simon de Beauvior as defining feminists thus, "those women or even men who fight to change the position of women, in liaison with and yet outside the class struggle, without totally sub-ordinating that change to a change in society" (27). Lisa Tuttle is of the opinion that feminism refers to the "advocacy of women's rights based on a belief in the equality of the sexes, and in its use, the word refers to everyone who is aware of and seeking to end women's subjugation in any way and for any reason" (107). Helen Chukwuma also notes that feminism is a "rejection of inferiority and striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes of women which deny them a positive identity" (ix). Thus far, the definitions show that anybody, male or female can be feminist as long as he/she consciously works for the betterment of the female gender.

Feminism as a concept is multi-faceted; such that literature is only one of the ways by which it is realized. As a movement, there does not appear to be an agreement by its practitioners as to its modes of operation. So, while some

are more fanatical about this advocacy, others have even rejected the "feminist" tag. African-American writer, Alice Walker, for example, is quoted in Johnson-Odim as advocating the concept of "womanism" as an alternative. Walker describes a womanist as a "Black feminist" or "feminist of color" who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire peoples, male and female" (315). But while Johnson-Odim feels this coinage enables Walker to break out of the narrow confines of general equality to encompass her struggle for race and class equality, Catherine Acholonu admits the "maturity" inherent in the term, but delineates the Black Womanist, as defined by Walker, to be essentially a lesbian. So Africans, for whom this is still a taboo, cannot identify with it, she concludes.

Acholonu therefore proffers her Afrocentric alternative, "Motherism", which she feels is a most acceptable term because it connotes the African ideals of "womanhood, wifehood, and domesticity". She rejects western feminist paradigms which encourage "African women to reject their traditional roles in the family" and concludes that western feminism is "anti-child, anti-nature and anti-culture" (82). In this, at least, she is in agreement with other feminist scholars in Nigeria like Marie Umeh and Rose Acholonu, the latter of whom associated "non-militant positive feminism" with the philosophy of gender complementarity and accommodation in human relationships. Charles Nnolim adds that "motherism further advocates love, tolerance, service and mutual cooperation of the sexes, not antagonism, aggression, militancy or violent confrontation" plus "protection and defence of family values" (47). Chukwuma also favours "African feminism which is progressive in its full commitment to developing women intellectually, educationally and economically while still retaining the nucleus of a home base" (ix). Nnolim also adds that "motherism further advocates love, tolerance, service and mutual cooperation of the sexes, not antagonism, aggression, militancy or violent confrontation" as well as "protection and defence of family values" (47).

So western (in most cases synonymous with radical) feminism, as propagated by contemporary feminists like Betty Freidan, Germaine Greer, Shulamite Firestone, and Elaine Showalter, encouraged a division of the sexes. Showalter even coined the term "gynocriticism" to refer to pro-feminist criticism. African feminism, on the other hand, recognizes and encourages the symbiotic and complementary relationship between the genders.

Despite opposition both within and outside the female gender, feminism has continued to be used because the alternative terms provided have not been adequate to describe the female sensibilities that women portray. When Chinweizu argues that it is women, not men who oppress their mates and that the women have no cause therefore to complain, he oversimplifies the matter. Since authors represent reality as they see it, female authors cannot therefore help but emphasize the issues that concern them. Some of these issues as found in the stories in *Breaking the Silence* include widowhood, self-identity and realization, marital problems, gender exploitation and betrayal and childbirth and barrenness.

Feminist Consciousness in *Breaking the Silence*

Breaking the Silence is a collection of nineteen stories by as many authors, many of whom were debuting in this publication. A few well-known names like Mabel Segun, Ifeoma Okoye and Karen King-Aribisala also contribute to the anthology. Because all contributors are female, there is the tendency to assume the existence of feminist thinking. In the first place, anthologizing only female writers definitely furthers the cause of womanhood. However, not all the stories have feminist themes; some deal with androgynous subject matters.

One of the most favourite themes of African feminist writing is the issue of childbirth, motherhood and barrenness. The African woman faces a special problem here because her society expects her to bear children for her husband. Motherhood (or rather, the lack of it) with its attendant problems is at the root of the crisis in "No Sweetness Here", the first story in the collection.

Efe, the protagonist has killed her wheelchair-bound husband, Onome in a fit of anger after she discovers that he has a son outside the marriage. The impotent rage she feels at her inability to procreate finds an outlet and she flings Onome down the stairs to his death. Earlier in the story, she had narrowly missed killing him with a kitchen knife during an argument, at the mention of her childlessness:

> Now completely annoyed, Onome shouted back at Efe. "You know what your problem is? Your problem is that you are suffering from complex. Your childlessness is eating into you and you've gone round the bend. You've …."

> Onome never finished his speech because suddenly he saw the sharp blade of the kitchen knife fly in his direction barely missing him by a hairs breath (sic) p5.

So, "No Sweetness Here" is actually the story of a woman racked with a guilty conscience at having failed in her primary duty to her husband, and who therefore becomes irritable and given to over-reaction. In the African milieu, the essence of marriage is primarily for procreation. Florence Orabueze submits that "any woman who cannot fulfill that primary function ought to be shown the way out of her husband's house or she stays to be treated like one of the wooden utensils in the man's house. The punishment does not stop there; for many names like he-woman, evil woman and witch will be attached to her" (108). Efe's resentment is aggravated when the arrival of Onome's son proves that the problem of their infertility lies with her. The arrival of Onome's son underscores the importance of the male child in African traditional society. Orabueze again argues that "having male children is the signal achievement through which a woman can raise her head high and feel a real sense of fulfillment" (108). Efe's reaction is borne out of frustration and the radicalism she displays is extreme and condemnable since African feminism is accommodationist.

Other feminist issues in the story include betrayal and vengeance, and the economic exploitation of women. In reviewing her life while in prison, Efe remembers what she had done to support her husband, Onome:

> She remembered how she slaved and suffered to help him pay his school fees during their undergraduate days in America. She had taken three different jobs …. She also had to help him with the cleaning of his room and sometimes washed his clothes, as well as doing oother household chores (p 3).
>
> . . .
>
> And each time they got into an argument, she would remind herself of the unfairness of the situation: what had she done to God to deserve such unfair treatment? After eight years of marriage, she had nothing to show for it. After years of slavery in America, after all the luxuries she denied herself to make Onome happy, why had she

> received nothing but ingratitude and disloyalty in return? (p. 9).

The often-vaunted assertion that woman is her own worst enemy is portrayed in this story through Sade, the proverbial "other woman". Her appearance severed the last restraints on the smoldering rage that had caused Efe to drive Onome to his car accident previously. The story leaves the readers wondering about the success or otherwise of the feminist cause when Efe is imprisoned after the death of Onome. However what is clear from the story is the expression of the problem women face because of societal demands on them.

Karen King-Aribisala's "Queen Honey Bee and Drone Designs" is one of the most significant stories in the anthology. Built on the symbolism of the bee community in which the queen rules, the story is an illustration of male consumption of female labour. Especially, it shows the intelligence (or deviousness) of the female sex in dealing with leadership crises. Faced with the possibility of an uprising against her leadership, Queen Honey Bee craftily agrees with the drones that they have a right to berate, banish, or even kill her. But first, they must drink her honey to decide whether or not she deserves their punishment. Unknown to them, she gives them poisoned honey, and before they drink themselves to death, they doltish change their minds. "Let things bee" becomes the slogan replacing the previous "Sting her to death"!

Apart from the appropriate symbolism, the language of this story makes it quite memorable. There is a play on the word "bee" as in "*responsibeelity*", "*bees knees*", "*Bee feast*", or "*bee in your bonnet*". Also, the alliterative /d/ imbues the short story with a rather poetic quality:

> Dotun Drone … a dandy decked out in a danshiki. He had a disarming smile which made him dangerous when the smile was displaced …. And there was Deji Drone who doubled as dentist and doctor, sitting beside Dupe Drone, a diplomat who danced attendance …. (pp 15 - 16).

The victory of Queen Bee is a definite statement of the author's belief in, and hope of female control of economic and political power. The matriarchal bee society, like the ant society is attractive to feminist writers because it provides an example of effective female control of large and productive communities.

Another story of immense significance to this study is Vera Osuokwu's "Our best years". It is a chronicle of the litany of woes of a young woman whose marriage has gone sour. Told in the first person, the story is a lament, a despairing cry for lost love by the narrator who gives us a history of her marriage, her efforts at making it work and her husband's indifference. And as usual when a woman complains of her "cracking and crumbling" marriage, she is careful to put the blame squarely on her husband and everybody else but herself. The story is concerned with the issues of sexual incompatibility, exploitation, motherhood, and the "plague" of mothers-in-law.

The narrator, like Okot p'Bitek's Lawino, cries out to fellow women in a vivid and spirited manner. The reader gets the impression that the narrator is telling the story before an audience of fellow women, whom she continually addresses directly. She begins her lament: "Something is eating me up. Tai is. Do you hear me, sister?" (p 21), and throughout the story, she calls out to "my sisters", "my mother's children", "sister Mary and Martha", "Jane", "Ronke", etc.

The narrator complains of the loss of sexual contact in her marriage, and this is only the physical manifestation of the state of her marriage. Her attempts at reviving her husband's interest in her go largely unappreciated and rebuffed. She then begins to wonder if there is something wrong with herself. A loveless marriage like this leaves the woman pining away. The narrator feels abandoned. The issue of wife abandonment according to Rose Acholonu is a serious violation of women's rights. Acholonu advocates that this issue of wife abandonment with its traumatic impact should be treated with seriousness, insight and sensitivity as writers like Nwapa, Nawal el Sadawi, Mariama Ba, Ngugi, Ifeoma Okoye etc, have done in their literary works. Her subtle complaint of economic exploitation is equally relevant to the story: "I also contributed some money to buy that car. Remember, just like everything else that we have in this house" (p 21). Her racy conversational style (typical of the African woman in crisis?) contributes to making this one of the most memorable and effective stories in the collection. In spite of the overriding mood of despair, the narrator sees "a mother bird and her brood flapping out of a cage", a metaphor of freedom for the woman.

The symbolic representation of freedom is also presented in "Butterflies" by Dupe Dosumu-Clement where the problems faced by the long-suffering women, Amina and Toun are described as a "cocoon that will mature into a

butterfly, a beautiful one that would fly and savour the freedom in the air" (p 39).

Mabel Segun's "The Philanthropist and the Journalist" explodes with all the "typical" feminist themes of matriarchy, male arrogance, exploitation of womanhood, and leviration. The story tells of an encounter between a young female journalist and a man with a past. His life story reveals his abuses of womanhood. In the end, he is forced to compensate for his previous abuses of womanhood.

Conclusion

The few representative stories that have been referred to show that feminism need not be antagonistic. As we discussed at the beginning of the paper, African feminism encourages and recognizes the symbiotic relationship between the sexes. This accounts for the fact that even when the women in the stories are faced with crumbling marriages, unfaithful partners, or a general sense of despair, they do not consider the option of a divorce. Instead, they do all they can to make the marriage work. Even Efe who kills her husband does so in a fit of anger, and immediately regrets killing the man she loved.

The response of the Women Writers of Nigeria (WRITA) in publishing this anthology fulfills, one hopes, the desire to have women write about themselves. As J. S. Mills (quoted by Greer) says:

> We may safely assert that the knowledge that men can acquire of women, even as they have been and are, without reference to what they might be is wretchedly imperfect and superficial and will always be so until women themselves have told all they have to tell (13).

We hope that other women as groups and individuals will also take up the gauntlet and let the menfolk know about how they feel, breaking their long silence in the process. One sure way of breaking this silence is through sound education which as Eboh notes, will break "the quagmire of unjustifiable subordination of women, the paternalistic attitude of men, and the entanglements of taboos and retrogressive customs which bog women down" (18).

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