

International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender
Studies (LALIGENS), Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 8 (2), Serial No 18, August/Sept., 2019: 103-109

ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v8i2.9>

**LESBIANISM IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE: AN APPRAISAL OF
OZIOMA NDUKA'S "CAUGHT IN THE ACT"**

MBANEFO S. OGENE, PhD

Department of English and Literature,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka - Nigeria

GSM: +2348051848014

sm.ogene@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Lesbianism was until recently identified as a taboo in Nigeria and also an ignominious act which no one ever dared to mention or extol in a literary work. The public identified it as queer or obscene behaviour in writing but with the advent of post colonialism, with such movements as feminism and psychoanalysis, the reasoning pattern among Nigerian female writers changed culminating in writings discussing lesbian life and problems. This study explores lesbianism in the short story as a subgenre that delved into the lesbian life, prospects and problems. It observes that lesbianism has started manifesting in Nigerian literature even though there are still major challenges facing this subgenre of literature.

Key Words: Lesbianism, lesbian literature, Nigerian literature, post colonialism

Introduction/Background to Lesbian Literature

Lesbian literature started emerging as a literary subgenre due to the controversies surrounding this field at the global market. While some regard it as queer literature, others brand it as obscene publication. Scholars on this field have traced the origin to the poetry of Sappho of Lesbos who is equally believed to have largely influenced by feminism. *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* states that "Lesbian literature includes works by lesbian authors, as well as lesbian themed works by heterosexual authors." (Web) It goes further to say that, "even works by lesbian writers that do not deal with lesbian themes are still often considered lesbian literature. Works by heterosexual writers which treat lesbian themes only in passing on the other hand, are not often regarded as lesbian literature. (Web)

Sappho's legacies remain in such topics which she wrote about which were on women's daily lives, their relationships and rituals. Significantly, Sappho indicated her love for girls as well as her admiration for women's beauty. This largely influenced many lesbian writers who have been writing over the ages and have changed with time.

Literature for Lesbians: A Historical Survey

Nigerian youth literature has started since the early 1940s to address the problem of youths especially on their place and role in the new society, their sexuality, love life and maturity. Lesbian themes bother on youths as this is a youthful behaviour. To determine who is a lesbian or heterosexual among the Nigerian youth writers may be a difficult task. For obvious reasons, this class of people have not manifested or they have not established their true identities of being lesbians or not. Evidence abounds where most writers on lesbian literature later turned out to be one, but there are equally cases where some were reintegrated into heterosexual lives. According to *Wikipedia*, "One notable female author of lesbian pulp fiction, who came out later in life as lesbian, was Ann Bannon, who created the Beebo Brinker series." (Web)

Globally, the young adult lesbian writers started featuring in 1970s with the works of Rosa Guy who published *Ruby* (1976) and later in 1980s, with Nancy Garden's *Annie on my Mind* published in 1982, telling the story of two high school girls who fall in love. On their inception, the characters in such gay writings faced violence, injury, or death, in most cases by accident. Later, the attitude of the society to these lesbians changed from the 1980s as most of their writings received positive sales and reviews.

In the African context, lesbian literature started emerging as a subgenre of the 21st century through the works of authors like the Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo and Cameroonian novelist Frieda Ekotto. Others include the works of such writers like the African American author, Alice Walker, who published *The Color Purple* in (1982) and Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*. (1992) Sarah Waters also published *Fingersmith* (2002) alongside other English-Language novelists.

Emergence of a New Generation in Nigerian Literature

The Awka Creative Circle started with a series of workshops, seminars and lectures organized for the undergraduate classes of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka - Nigeria. In 2016, a new literary consciousness was created on youth literature. This consciousness was sudden as students under the aegis of Creative Writing Workshop under the tutelage of Dr. Mbanefo S. Ogene made a choice of writing papers against corruption and social vices. They chose to name the text under which these writings were published – *Rakes and Dustbins*. A peer editorial board was set up which include a girl Ozioma Nduka. New short stories were churned out and the volume of the collection was so large that the font was reduced to enable the students afford the publication cost of their pet ideas. One paper conspicuously stood out of others and was submitted for this journal publication. That paper was unique due to the new theme it explored, the theme of lesbianism. Like in other cases, the ideas expressed in the paper were such that they started with excitements but ended in tragedy.

An Analysis of Ozioma Nduka's "Caught in the Act", A Short Story

Ozioma Chinemelum Nduka was born in Rumuokwuta, Rivers State Nigeria on 19th September, 1998. Her parents Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Nduka are natives of Oraifite, Ekwusigo Local Government Area of Anambra State Nigeria. She spent most of her childhood and teenage years in Elemenwo, Rivers State. She gained admission into Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka to read English and literature and was at her 300 level when she wrote the short story, "Caught in the Act" as part of her contribution to the Workshop on Creative Writing. Ozioma's story attracted attention after publication as people started wondering if the young girl is really a lesbian.

Asked if she is a lesbian? Ozioma shuddered and responded 'not-at-all' and states that she does not intend to be one. How then did she write a story on lesbian literature? She said that her friends and siblings told her stories of what was then in vogue in Rivers State where she grew up. Rivers state is an oil rich state in Nigeria and its capital city is Port-Harcourt. Evidences abound that most rich ladies inhabit this state and have long since started practicing lesbianism due to their exposure to both western culture and European lifestyles brought forward by the expatriates who lived long in the area. In her novel, *Yellow Yellow*, Kaine Agary mentions two ladies Sisi and Lolo who helped Zilayefa to stand on her feet. According to Zilayefa "Lolo introduced me as her little sister to her friends and I was pleased at how fast they all accepted me, though Lolo left no room for questions. She controlled most discussions and had a way of avoiding the questions she did not feel like answering..." (Agary, 54). Even though most female characters in Agary's *Yellow Yellow* practiced heterosexual relationships, they have a syndicate that acted like lesbians. There are high class ladies who made their wealth and self.

"Caught in the Act" started as a surprising apology from the character, Chika, to her boss, Mrs Okoli who was caught by her in a female – female sexual relationship inside her office. The short story was published in 2016 by Creative Writing Class with Christen International Company Limited, Awka. The shock of catching her madam in such a relationship was unexpected and created a feeling of shock and wonder in the mind of a younger woman who has never anticipated that a woman may have an urge to have 'sexual intercourse' with a fellow woman.

The story "Caught in the Act" started when Ekene, a Canada based business tycoon (a woman of caliber) roughly bumped into another married woman in the person of Nnnenna Okoli. A possibly premeditated and planned accident occurred, leading to the development of interest in love affair from the initiation of the former and lasted for three years before Nnnenna was dumped. What started as a surprise to Nnenna Okoli turned to serious enjoyment as the author states that:

She actually began looking forward to her lover's visits and of course the acceptance of this anticipation was preceded by months of blatant denial of the fact that she was falling in love with her. (Rakes: 30)

The narrator of the story is a night guard at Chikied Furniture Company. Chika, who fronts as the omniscient narrator is serving under Mrs. Nnenna Okoli. Much as the reader of this story wonders what pleasure a woman could derive from having sexual relationship with her fellow woman, the dialogue between Ekene and Nnenna offers the possible answer:

Ekene: "Sit down. Don't deny it. You need the money." She said, making no move to hold her back. Nnenna sat down.

Nnenna: "What favour?" She said.

Ekene: "I want you to be my escort."

Nnenna: "Escort?"

Ekene: "Call girl. Whatever you name it. I want you."

Nnenna: "You? A woman? You're disgusting."

Ekene: "I'm not. I like women, you especially and I'll pay you. Your husband will never know. Think about it. Give me a call if you decide." (30)

An analysis of the discussion reveals that poverty could possibly be behind the reason of a woman submitting to a fellow woman as if she is a man. Again, there is the dominant interest partner in a lesbian relationship who treats the subordinate as a 'prostitute' or 'wife'. Universally, lesbians love their fellow women and want to treat them exactly the way that men treat women. The term used by lesbian lovers is always coded, in the context of the short story "Caught in the Act," it is "escort" or "call girl". There is every tendency that a lesbian relationship usually leads to the breakdown of family order. Nnenna is married with one male child and investigations by her lesbian lover reveals that she is broke and has debts to settle when Ekene met her. This serves as a doorway for Ekene who is her fellow woman to take advantage of her, even to the point of humbling her to spread her legs for the pleasure of another woman.

Ordinarily, a lesbian relationship seems harmless because the married woman's husband would least suspect the wife so this gives her a covering that will also make people to least suspect the accomplices. The negative side of this relationship is that the married one naturally develops apathy to the husband for not providing what another woman could provide for her. This apathy leads to unfaithfulness as the wife satisfies both her biological and psychological needs through the lesbian lover.

Having been addicted to lesbian behaviours, the protagonist in the short story, Nnenna Okoli gets acquainted with another woman and the unwholesome relationship has lasted before they were accidentally caught by Chika, the night guard. With all her pleading of keeping her discovery secret, Chika still later tells Mr. Okoli what the wife Nnenna has done:

Her husband had been trailing her all night and still had not figured out why she came back late every day from work. This night, he stood in front of the gate of

the company trying to figure out a way in when a woman walked out of the building. He knew all his wife's colleagues and was so sure that this was not one of them. A few minutes later, his wife drove out of the compound with an expression of worry on her face. He knew something was up. He snuck into the building and took a lift to the fifth floor where his wife worked. There, he saw no one except the night guard on duty... Chika thought about it for a while, then finally decided that she had a moral obligation to tell him. And that was how she told him everything she saw that night. (*Rakes*: 31)

It is obvious that lesbian habit hardly dies once it enters into an addict's lifestyle. Mrs. Nnenna Okoli who had risen to the level of C.E.O. in her company at Woji, having enjoyed the life of a lesbian decided to engage her own personal call girls, extending this to multiple partners before her illicit act reaches its climax:

Nne enjoyed her company; Ekene made her happy in ways that no one could, not counting the sex which was of course a mind-blowing experience every single time. She realized she was not doing this for the money anymore; she actually enjoyed it... Ben could not bring her satisfaction and she craved women more than ever. She did some digging and discovered some lesbian prostitutes residing in Ogbunabali, Port Harcourt. (*Rakes*: 30)

Like the prostitutes in Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and Ikechukwu Asika's *Tamara*, Nnenna Okoli could now afford to hire her own subordinates, but the result is disastrous. Coming to work the next morning, Nnenna met her drunk husband who accompanied her to her office and stabbed her to death for cheating him in marriage relationships.

The plot of this story is simple; it tells of the woman who out of her poor state yields to the pressure of becoming a lesbian and in turn meets her Waterloo by paying the supreme sacrifice of death from the hand of her lawful husband for her misdeeds. The theme is on the evils of lesbianism. This theme, even though new in Nigerian literature, has advanced to the level of being better accommodated in more civilized countries of Europe, where lesbian literature is no longer regarded as queer or obscene one and interested lesbians are allowed to live a mutual life.

Findings

This research has discovered that lesbianism really exists in Nigerian literature and that the practices have reached such a high magnitude that writers are now developing interests in this area. Nigerian youths have equally become sensitive to this field and now write on it.

There is evidence that some women allow others to gain access to their sexual organs because of poverty. Most of the women that involve others into the lesbian practices are likely those that never got married or were failures in their marriage; for instance in Ozioma Nduka's short story, "Caught in the Act", the reader is not told if Ekene is married or not, but is made to see

her as an affluent woman. Nnenna could equally engage the services of lesbian prostitutes when she had made money and risen to the top, being the C.E.O.

The study also reveals that lesbianism is a habit which grows stronger with time. It took Nnenna one month to think over the matter of accepting Ekene's proposal of joining lesbians, but when she did, she received generous rewards in monetary terms for her submission. According to Nduka, "after being Ekene's mistress for a year, she actually began looking forward to her lover's visits and of course the acceptance of this anticipation was preceded by months of blatant denial of the fact that she was falling in love with her." (30)

The story also proves that many lesbians in Nigeria are married women who use the marriage institution as camouflage to their illicit and unnatural extramarital relationships with ladies of their sex. This discovery makes lesbianism more dangerous in Nigeria as men are merely used as cover for married lesbians, the men are usually starved of their conjugal rights, while the lesbian wives pretend that their husband demands much sex which they 'don't always enjoy'. This puts men in disadvantage as they are rated poorly as carnally minded, beasts and sex maniacs by both church and the society. This act is noticed in Nnenna Okoli's escapades as the husband is kept under psychological and emotional torture, trailing the wife, getting drunk and eventually turning out to be a frustrated man that murders his wife as an escape to his woes. The family unit is destroyed as a result of lesbianism. This is not so in more civilized nations where lesbian women refuse to get married to men but eventually wed themselves and adopt babies for their 'cohabitation'.

Lesbians now use different strategies as decoy to cover their acts; such practices include having sexual relationships in their offices, going out together to hotels for entertainment, sharing accommodation as roommates, and fronting as reading partners in universities and other higher institutions. Mrs. Nnenna Okoli used her office to relate sexually with her hired lesbian prostitutes, hoping that nobody would ever suspect such act or catch her, but luck ran out of her when the night guard (Chika) caught her while on duty. There is also betrayal on the part of Chika who promised her madam that she won't tell anybody what happened but turns around to tell the husband of Nnenna everything that happened.

Conclusion

Lesbianism cannot supplant the original ideal of sexual relationship which is made for man and woman (heterosexual) because lesbian practices are misbehaviours that are unnatural and unacceptable and against the divine plan for man and woman. Every religion condemns a situation where a woman not only lies on top of a fellow woman but excites or induces sexual pleasure on the other, no matter the means of doing so. Whatever freedom or right that women claim they are pursuing that made them engage in lesbian activities should be seen as a serious deviation from truth and life as well as getting themselves into bondage. The result of lesbian literature always ends tragically, in frustrating and objectionable manner. The death of Nnenna in "Caught in the Act" is actually horrifying and bitter.

It is true that most women are unfortunate to have permanent sex partners and so being sexually starved find alternative sex relationship with their fellow women or even animal pets more convenient, the dangers of getting involved in lesbianism far outweighs that of marital conflicts and problems. The act is hated and condemned by the society, religion and nature, especially in Africa. It creates avenue for wild and unproductive living and sometimes gives way for sadistic behaviours, it cannot offer the healthy environment needed for birth and continuation of life. The Nigerian lesbian literature is passing through a phase of development. Unlike the American literature of the 1930s, 40s, and early 50s in which lesbian life is presented as tragedy, ending either through the suicide of the lesbian protagonist, or the change of the lesbian to start enjoying sex with male gender, Nigerian writers should produce more writings that make lesbian practices alien to African culture and contrary to nature, the scripture and human existence. They should carry out this campaign vigorously to encourage healthy sexual coexistence.

Works Cited

- Adimora-Ezeigbo, Akachi. *Trafficked*. Lagos: Lantern Books, 2008. Print.
- Agary, Kaine. *Yellow Yellow*. Lagos: Dtalkshop, 2006. Print.
- Asika, Ikechukwu. *Tamara*. Ibadan: Kraft Books, 2013. Print.
- Nduka, Ozioma. "Caught in the Act", in Mbanefo S. Ogene (ed.). *Rakes and Dustbins*. Awka: CWC in Conjunction with Christon International, 2016. Print.
- Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. *Lesbian Literature*. Last Sourced: 3 June, 2017. Web.