

Feminization of Poverty: A Reading of Okpewho's *The Last Duty*

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Abstract

This work examines patriarchy's ability to deform the woman in Okpewho's *The Last Duty* and affirms the centrality of choice as the basic weapon in her struggle for meaningful existence in the new millennium. Since the fundamental structures in the society have pushed her to the periphery of existence, whenever she comes to public focus, it is to enact the drama of immanence. Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty* continues this discussion and places the woman where she has always been made to serve – among the poor and weak people.

Men have presumed to create a feminine domain – the Kingdom of life, of immanence – only in order to lock up women therein. (*Simone de Beauvoir*)

Introduction:

When Emile Durkheim (1933:72) sees every phenomenon in society as a social fact, it is because of the coercive influence it imposes on the people. And since society has distinctive characteristics that can determine the reactions of its members to life, each individual is to a large extent a reflection of his/her social environment and attains self-expression through the standards defined by it. Consequently, the status of women has often represented the social distribution of power and its regularity towards the achievement of commonly shared goals in the human society.

Women have performed selfless services to humanity despite the marginal position accorded to them by their traditional roles as wives, mothers and homemakers. It is as if providence conferred on them the status of "second class citizens" or the society has conditioned them into invisible beings in an attempt to institutionalise male dominance. Their visibility, whenever it is convenient, begins and ends with the fulfilment of socially acceptable obligations. These women are Aidoo's "decorative slaves" and Hurston's "de mule uh de world."

The patriarchal structure of our traditional society had laid the foundation for the exploitation because it exposed them to the hazards of illiteracy, economic and political powerlessness. Although Catherine Acholonu (1995) appears to overlook these deprivations, recent research in

African gender relations discovered that “patrifocality” has reduced women to “beasts of burden” in many societies. And because men are agents of social conditioning in the definition of women, they have always used coercive power to ensure women’s subordination. This problem attracted world opinion in the second half of the twentieth century when the United Nations declared 1975-1985 the Decade for uplifting the status of women.

Nevertheless, not much has happened to change the situation of so many women. They do most of the world’s work, yet their standard of living has scarcely improved. Poverty seems to wear a woman’s face because the majority of them live below the poverty line. Poverty, in this context, refers to living in a state of severe want, where the basic needs of life are inaccessible. This work identifies poverty as the social anomaly that denies the female sex the right to life and happiness in Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*. Also, it seeks to evolve new roles with which women can reconstruct their vision in the society.

Feminization of poverty in the social system

According to Hess *et al* (1985:641), feminization of poverty is a concept that sees most adult women as poor people. This is because after the emergence of property ownership, men have appropriated women as major constituents of their estate. But most importantly, they are believed to be necessary for the attainment of erotic pleasure although they have a potency to destroy. Gerder Lerner (1979:39) buttresses this fact when she describes men as the primary agents of female subjugation, an argument that the “Re Stocking Manifesto” affirms by declaring that “Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of oppression...”

The problem emanates from their sex determined roles because as Barbara Rogers (1990:23) posits, women have been domesticated for the service of men. Sexuality might be all that men can afford women but certainly this is not all that life means to them. They are treated as chattels and domestic slaves despite their contributions to human development. This explains why de Beauvoir (172:139) has insisted that women have “never had a fair chance – neither liberty nor education”. And so, feminist criticism poses a challenge to “reconstruct otherness” – in Helen Haste’s words. This explains why a teenage girl who becomes pregnant, for instance, has a high probability of being fixated in life while the teenage male partner moves on. Therefore, the most obvious effect of social exploitation on women is poverty.

Pearce and McAdoo (1981:17) undertake a revealing analysis of the situation when they remark that women are poor for female causes.

... women, especially minority women, may be poor for some of the same reasons as men, but few men becomes

poor because of female causes. Men generally do not become poor because of divorce, sex role socialization, sexism or of course pregnancy. Indeed some may lift themselves out poverty by the same means that plunge women into it. The same divorce that frees a man from the financial burdens of a family may result in poverty for his ex-wife and children.

Indeed, poverty is inextricably linked with the distribution of power in the social structure so it grows directly from the way society is organised.

Since women occupy the lowest position on the social history with children, history and research have identified them as the poorest group in the world. This is why men have locked them in myths and popularize them through their sexuality. Okpewo's *The Last Duty*, is one of the most representative texts in African Literature because it removes women from history especially the Nigerian Civil War, denies their role as a productive force in the society and continues them to the body.

A critique of Okpewo's *The Last Duty*

Although many writers have recalled the traumas of the Nigerian Civil War, *The Last Duty* is a testament to validate the betrayal of trust, which was associated with that experience. Okpewo recaptures this through the vivid presentation of man's search for order in the midst of chaos and the desperate bid to exert control on other human beings after losing the comforts of peaceful existence. Lives are destroyed, families face separation, people are displaced while others are exposed to diverse forms of deprivation. In the process, Aku is trapped, Oshivere is clamped down, Oghenovo wears a thin mask, Odibo runs and Ali is fooled just because Toje wants to maintain power.

Toje rebuffs Oshivere's rivalry by recommending him for detention as a rebel collaborator. This was after the federal occupation of Urukpe, when many Simbians fled the war territory with Simbian troop. Yet some of them stayed back and became victims of ruthless pursuit despite the Federal Government's plea for calm throughout the Black Gold State. In consonance with the call for protection of individual rights and liberties by the government, Oshivere is led by human sympathy so save a Simbian boy from mob attack.

This action is used to eliminate Oshivere whom Toje sees as the physical representation of his stunted aspiration. He confesses in unmistakable term:

I felt that Mukoro Oshivere stood in my way. And that again is why I have not hesitated to seek carnal

pleasure with his forlorn wife now that I feel my
manhood flawed, my potency questioned. (5)

This confirms de Beauvoir's (1972:90) claim that a man sees the woman basically as a "a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object – an Other through whom he seeks himself". Thus, with Oshivere's confinement in Iddu, the stage is set for Aku to enact the battle for survival.

Major Ali, the Commander of the Federal Troop in Urukpe apprehends the dangers that women might be exposed to during the upheavals and cautions against their exploitation by unscrupulous individuals. This warning does not deter Toje from executing his plans for Oshivere's family because he has economic power. To him, power is absolute and with it he exerts pressure almost on the very air that Aku breathes. He boasts because he has "the one thing which can decide whether she and her child can live. That's money" (27).

Women's economic powerlessness is a major factor that makes them vulnerable to exploitation. While Toje revels in his affluence, Aku is helpless. Her travails, like most women, is more harrowing because she is economically dependent on her husband who is in detention. In an interview with Dozie Okebalama, Dorothy Obor counsels the contemporary to be self-sufficient or else she "might end up a failure, disappointed and frustrated even if the husband is a millionaire" (11). Oshivere's sojourn in Iddu introduces Aku and her child to the bitter struggle for existence under very excruciating conditions.

Besides, the situation is much more severe because it borders also on survival, safety and security. Aku captures it more vividly in this lament.

Where can I run, what can I do? ... if I can no longer
go to the market to buy foodstuffs for my child and
myself, then how can we survive? ... How long can I
survive in this town if I stay isolated from the entire
community? (12)

Aku needs food for the child and herself, but she can neither obtain it from the farm nor the market since the people consider her to be a rebel even though marriage should have integrated her into the social order.

The Last Duty gives us a picture of Aku's war with survival and the consequence(s) of that encounter on her family. In this warfare, she is a lonely recruit, and so, becomes susceptible to Toje's oppressive apparatus. His intervention is deliberately designed to aggravate her physical and psychological insecurity. Aku suspects this duplicity but feigns ignorance because she needs Toje's benevolence. She believes that if he withdraws the gift of food, clothes and money, "there was nothing [they] could do about it

but wait and die” (19). The truth is that she is not ready to die; rather, she is waiting hopefully for the release of her husband.

Indeed, life does not offer Aku other alternatives for survival so she condescends to Toje’s wicked adventure and allows herself to be used for the experimentation of his animal ecstasy. The implication of this on Oshivere is that every true reflection of life should accommodate the pressure imposed on the individual by the society. For although Aku’s choice violates the collective conscience of her milieu, it sustains Oshivere’s family in the battle for survival. This battle is meant to preserve Aku for her husband. Thus despite her affair with Toje, Oshivere remains the object of her commitment. Aku is a supportive wife but that her dream of bliss is aborted can be traced to patriarchy’s natural ability to enforce female exploitation. She needs food for survival but she cannot go to the market to get it. Interestingly, Toje who offers to help places a tag on it – her sexuality.

Consequently, Aku’s response to life is necessitated by Toje’s arousal of her needs. Denga’s (1982:22) work on the role of needs in business and educational administration can be used to explain her dilemma.

Needs are drivers which demand satisfaction. When needs are not satisfied a person becomes restless, tense and may exhibit abnormal behaviour. He may remain in a state of dis-equilibrium until the needs are met wholly or at least partially.

In other words, Toje has initiated an internal operative tension that accelerates Aku’s desire to satisfy her basic need for affection

Abraham Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs is useful for the analysis of Aku’s plight. In an easy tilted “A theory of Human Motivation”, he classifies needs into five categories in the order of importance.

- a. The physiological;
- b. Safety and security;
- c. Love and belonging;
- d. Self-esteem; and
- e. Self-actualization

The physiological needs which include the drive for food, air, water, warmth, shelter and sex are most prepotent. Maslow argues that nothing else seems to matter if this set of needs on the hierarchy are not met.

Aku’s inability to satisfy the first three categories of needs predisposes her to an inner state of disequilibrium that culminates in her encounter with Toje. In other words, it is the physiological tension associated with the activation of these needs that informs her search for emotional fulfilment.

Therefore, the conflicts in *The Last Duty* reflect the crisis between desire and reality that is noticeable in the six principal characters in the novel. The crisis is intensified by Oshivere's release from detention and the bitter taste of truth that lies ahead.

While in Iddu, the love and devotion of his wife and child are virtues that strengthened him to insist on his personal integrity. Aku represents something unique to Oshivere as he puts it here:

A very jewel of a wife. A matchless queen, whose courage and nobility demand equal demonstration of fortitude from me now as always. (209)

His freedom exalts "the force of truth and honesty" above economic expediency and proves their indispensability in the search for human dignity.

In actual fact, Oshivere owes his family "the last duty" which Okpewho defines as a "a deep conviction of what [man] must do in the interest of justice and honour, whatever the odds against him". But there is a first duty that precedes the last duty and it is a commitment to the survival instinct in man/woman. And so, the need for self-esteem is not fundamental to Aku because she lacks the resources for survival. Even though she is committed to her husband, this commitment is functional in life not in death; and it is unfortunate that Toje exerts selfish control over the only source of her staying alive. It follows naturally that Aku's inability to fulfil the first duty which borders on survival constrained her from insisting on her last duty that is this instance of self-esteem.

Black feminism and the re-definition of women

The society is the basis for Aku's predicament, and so, her dehumanisation is a symbolic illustration of the intimidation inflicted on women because of sex. But then, Black Feminism is not anti-men. Instead, it seeks to establish women's right to life and happiness by asking men to support and promote female sensibilities. It has moved from blaming men for the problems of women to initiating new avenues for female assertion because women constitute a factor in public life that cannot be overlooked.

But despite the fact that women's self-definition cannot completely ignore the economic organization of the society, it is unimaginable to assume that they must always conform to male prescriptions. True feminism, Filomina Steady (1981:38), says, "is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and reliant". Women have a right to individual autonomy and with it they can declare like Maya Angelou (1991:X1): "Life had no right to beat me to the ground, to batter my teach into my throat." This is because humanity is not male, especially since Gen. 1:26 presents the female as an aspect of the divine essence. So, the society

stands to lose if it condemns its women to mediocrity for as Catherine Stimpson (1984:64) remarks, they have “the brain, courage and imagination to serve as a matrix of culture not simply as its captives and imitators”.

The realisation has some implications for womanhood, particularly the Nigerian women. Female assertion should move beyond compromising the body to the celebration of women’s economic independence which accommodates men as partners in progress; equal in human essence but with complementary roles. Nigerian and African writers, therefore, have a responsibility to develop new roles for women that can possibly enlarge Aissatou’s vision in *So Long a Letter* and Anowa’s suppressed spirit in *Anowa*. If women form the backbone of the economy; if women do most of the world’s work, with active participation in farming, food production and trading, then poverty should not be feminized in the twenty-first century.

Yet the “guarantee to full rights for women”, as Thomas Shuts (1987:15) comments, depends on “the denunciation of patriarchy, the eradication of exploitation and the strict enforcement of the rights of women by governments in Africa”. Perhaps, this has prompted the recent moves by wives of Heads of State in Africa to explore avenues for maintaining peace in the continent since women and children are the most oppressed groups in conflict situations. Also, the Nigerian Government has reacted to the plights of women by using projects such as “the Better Life for Rural Women” of Maryam Babangida, “the Family Support Programme” of Maryam Abacha and “the Child Care Trust” of Stella Obasanjo, among others, to consolidate women for meaningful participation in society even though these programmes have done little to improve the condition of rural women.

Conclusion

The resolutions made in the World Women Conference in Beijing point to the fact that women have the key to their destiny. This implies that the Nigerian writers owe the world a NEW female character, a new woman who possesses power through her dignified association with men. Unlike Aku, she should move and act within the society because her social relevance should dismantle the “sexual mountain”. She is a woman who accepts responsibilities and achieves fulfilment in the midst of challenges. Nevertheless, she must have access to social amenities, improved health service, better living standards, social acceptability and equal opportunities with men. This is because the ultimate aim of socialising women into the male-centred society is to ensure their participation in the social, political and economic emancipation of Nigeria. Since this cannot be achieved under the stifling impacts of negative traditional practices, it is imperative for Black women to be demarginalised in order for poverty to be defeminized.

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