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Peter Onwudinjo and the Struggle for Female Recognition and Justice

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ABSTRACT

The feminine gender has always been at the lowest rung of the society. Her voice is insignificant and is not reckoned with to possess the 'wisdom' needed to carry any society forward. Her role is perceived to be in the kitchen and in child-bearing. Any other responsibility must be deemed fit and bestowed on her by the patriarchy who rules over her. Literary scholarship/productions for some decades now have tried to x-ray the status of men and women in society with the aim of correcting some 'abnormalities'. Peter Onwudinjo's poetry joins the train as he exposes the second class derogatory treatment of women in the society and seeks a redress. His poetry is engaged in the struggle for female recognition and justice, and in most cases the women are encouraged to be at the forefront of the struggle for their own liberation.

INTRODUCTION

One of the characteristics of literature is that it is dynamic; it is capable of adapting to changing social situations. In other words, literature usually reflects existing social climate, which in turn has been the raw materials for expression of creative impulses. A study of Onwudinjos's poetry shows a departure in form and content from early written poetry from Africa or Nigeria. The subject of women empowerment, women rebellion against existing patriarchal codes, and the need for equality and justice which are predominant issues in Onwudinjo's poetry were hitherto not subjects of poetry, especially by men who dominated the poetic landscape (Ojaide 1996, Ezeigbo 1996, Raji 2004).

This paper is based on the feminist and formalist orientations. The former is aimed at placing women at the centre of literary discourse, and the later opines that literary criticism or analysis of a given text should be based on the internal ordering of the text (plot, characterisation, language, etc).

Though Women of Biafra actually evokes the pains, deaths and unnecessary suffering of the young zealous Biafran soldiers, the poet personae equally

portrays the dehumanisation/debasement of women in the Biafran enclave. The title poem "Women of Biafra" remembers with nostalgia the sufferings of "... the women/who strapped their hungry babies a-back, / and wept'' (30). These women were forcefully deprived of their husbands and their "strappling youth's forceriped to men/overnight on fire and blood" (31). The women of Biafra, aptly referred to as "apostrophies to pain" in the poem, weeps: for the nameless logs of wood carted to hasty graves everyday on barrows and push truck they mourned
for the trucks strewn and scattered across mine fields and blazing parapets (31-32)

The poet-persona finds it "so hard to forget" this "petals of tenderness" who were at "the endless walls of fire and brimstone... this 30 monstrous months" (32).

Since Women of Biafra mostly depicts the pains of the Biafran soldiers, one would have expected the collection to be titled ''Biafran Days'' or ''The Biafran Soldiers'' or from any other poem in the collection. The title is an indication of the author's emotional attachment to life as it affects women in the society. The poet identifies with the pains of the women, who though they didn't physically participate in the war, were psychologically involved.

Songs of the Fire Place (2005) evokes "the plight of Agbomma, ... who struggles to hold her ground in the face of domestic and societal aggression against the childless woman" (back cover). The collection is also a testament debunking culpability of only the woman in childlessness. It is a plea to society to recognise that there are two parties (man and woman, husband and wife) to the issue of fruitfulness in marriage. It is equally a call to women, and this is carried into the next collection, to refuse to be intimidated by aggressive societal castigations occasioned by patriarchal dictates.

Agbomma, the poet-protagonist, is in a blissful relationship with her husband, Nebosa, until her mother-in-law came on a three-day visit to protest Agbomma's childlessness. Her husband lays the blame of childlessness at her feet. The names Nebosa calls his wife are derogatory: 'empty pot', 'bread fruit/minus living seeds', 'cob/devoid of eating grains'. Agbomma laments:

Bosa calls me horrible names husband calls me ede mbekwu wild cocoyam cook an'fry it weeks on end it will never turn to food husband calls me ede okpo grandmother cocoyam that lost its freshness years ago cook an'fry it weeks on end it will never turn to food husband calls me ede ogbaka nti eat-an-scratch-from-head-to-toe coco itch that makes a man despair and makes a woman scratch her crotch up and down the village square without a drop of shame (32).

Her husband even abandons her and for four years she was ''sentenced/to this hermitage/of lonely bed/lonely table'' (42). She becomes an object of shame and disdain, a reproach: the ''taunt of neighbours/laughing stock/for women and idle men... '' (31). Men, women and children make her the centre-stage of public ridicule: children jeered at

me men shook their heads and women wagged their tongues and tails at me (70).

The above can only be so because a perceived major function of the woman (wife) in society is child-bearing; she is the one with the womb. Therefore when there is no fruit of the womb she must take the blame for not fulfilling the real reason for her existence in the home and in the society. Every other activity or element necessary for conception but which may be absent is overlooked or not taken into consideration. The man or husband is exonerated.

The issue of childlessness in a marriage and the attendant negative implications for the woman (wife) is the wrestling pitch, the battle-field, for Onwudinjo to pitch his battle for female recognition and justice. Onwudinjo argues that fruitfulness in marriage is a dual responsibility between husband and wife. When there is fruitlessness the blame (if need be) should be shared by both partners in the relationship. "A man must first be pregnant/before a woman can hope to be" (Songs...19). And when there is failure on the part of one partner to live up to his share of responsibility there is bound to be a problem. Nebosa stops his sexual obligation to his wife and yet the latter bears the blame of childlessness:

My husband says i'm barren
Ask your brother when last he knocked
At my door (19)

The wife cries "out/ like a deer/ caught in the toils/ of the leopard'' for understanding from the society that has made her a butt of jests:day and night
I keep my door ajar
I cleared the land and hoed and wait
for the rain to seed the soil but nimbus fled to cirrus (19)

Repeatedly the poet maintains that "a man must first be pregnant/before a woman can hope to be" (19-21). The 'Ballads of Admonitions' from father to son are the poet's. The wife (woman) must be given a chance. As long as the woman is young and the womb is intact, she should not be made to lose her home – "let the patched pet remain/so long it holds water'' (56). In addition, her worth in marriage must not only be measured by her ability to reproduce her kind. Her other virtues of peace, tenderness, diligence, etc., should also be acknowledged.

It is also worthy of note that Agbomma refused to be cowed by the aspersions of the society on her. She faces her accusers boldly and states her case or position without any fear. She swears "never to squat/on shit passed by another" (Songs...70). She declares to her husband's kinsmen:

I REFUSE TO TAKE THE BLAME

I am not to blame for the chill on dog's nose was it not already cold before the harmattan arrived? (Emphasis mine)

The recurrent reference to 'kinsmen' when she is stating her case indicates three things: (1) the men are the only ones allowed listening to her because

they are the only people in charge. (2) The women have no business in decision making. (3) Wisdom only belongs to men. This open declaration, this readiness not to allow the status quo is, is a protest and a cry for justice. It is a protest against wrongly-established social norms that militate against the happiness and fulfilment of the woman in society.

The struggle to negate the status quo and all the attendant implications that bestow on the woman a second-class position or devaluates the woman as a rational human being continues in because I'm Woman (2006). In this collection, Onwudinjo seems to be saying like the Algerian Poet, Neto (1974): Now is the hour to march together bravely to the world of all men No one shall silence us No one can impede us (In Ikiddeh, 88-94).

The female protagonist resolves to name her child. Again this is one of the exclusive rights of men. Expectedly, this is a 'rebellion' the society cannot condone; nobody supports her acclaimed right to name her child – just because she is a woman (65). However, for the woman (the poet himself), it is time for change. She resolves: I will name my child whether the day is good or bad I will name my child. (70)She goes further: I refuse to name my daughter from behind the screen of husband, or father-in-law or anyone at all (70).

This is unprecedented! In many African societies including the poet's Igboland, a mother is only free to give a child a name after the father has done so. The name given by the father is the real, popular and formal name of the child, while whatever name the mother gives is regarded as very unofficial. In many cases, it is only the mother who knows or calls the child by that name. Mangina, Onwudinjo's female protagonist, insists that she must name her child; that she has a right to. Indeed she did name her child! This is a breakthrough. It is a challenge of the denigration inflicted upon the women by patriarchy.

Her successful naming of the child becomes the final step to the full-blown female or feminine revolution in Because I'm Woman. Mangina becomes the leader of a revolutionary movement of women demanding for women's right to own ancestral lands, to inheritance of family property, to be part of every decision-making process in society, to be recognised as humans and not just as women, etc. The need to be recognised as a human being and not just a woman is predicated on the belief that being a woman is being a nobody; being a man is being a somebody, a human being and everybody (Egunjobi 3).

Onwudinjo is on the side of change. His poetry belongs to what Ime Ikiddeh (2008) would call "literature of value" because it ''...pulsates with creative images of change and the ennobling vision of liberation (in Onyerionwu et al 93).

The Poet's concern with female recognition and justice is an indication of the continuous, age-old symbiotic relationship between literature and society. Changing global trends are gradually changing the woman from being perceived and treated as only an appendage of the man, but also according her an image that could give her recognition as human. It is

therefore not surprising that Onwudinjo's poetry is not 'crying' over lost cultural values, but is situating the woman among men.

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