WOMEN'S BODIES SERVING ENVIRONMENTAL/SOCIAL (IN)-JUSTICE

Professor Elizabeth A. NYAGER, PhD
Department of Theatre & Film Arts
University of Jos, Jos
Plateau State, Nigeria
Email: nyagere@yahoo.com

Abstract
The environment and injustice are part of the concerns that are located within the fields of Eco-feminism and Eco-criticism. These concerns are universal. Sarah Ray Jaquette, a University of Oregon professor, in a seminal publication in 2009, came up with the concept of "The Ecological Other" by which she sought to highlight issues of social injustice 'embedded' in U.S. environmental policy and practice against the "ecological others" whom she identified as, Native Indians, People with Disabilities and Migrants. In this paper, we examine the works of two Nigerian female writers, both of them reputable and versatile as feminists who are also environmentally conscious and concerned about issues of injustice against women in our societies. In other words, they are eco-feminists. Eco-feminism describes a feminist approach to understanding ecology. Eco-feminists usually draw on the concept of gender to theorise on the relationship between humans and the natural environment. This paper attempts to reflect both the natural environments and the psychological domains under which injustice is meted out towards women and how these women respond to these situations in their lives. The women as represented through the chosen texts are thus considered the environmental/psychological 'others' whose 'bodies' have become the objects of social injustice in our own social domains of Nigeria. However, some of these women have been shown to have overcome victim-hood to become agents of positive change; negotiating and promoting social justice".

Introduction

Contemporary women writers from Africa like their global counterparts have been topical in handling contemporary global issues. The environment and social Injustice are among such issues. Nigerian women writers like Tess Onwueme and Sefi Atta are good examples of African women writers who are versatile and skilled in writing on global and contemporary issues including the environment and social justice. Tess Onwueme, for instance in her play, *What Mama Said*, skilfully highlights the ecological issues of the impact on the environment resultant from oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Onwueme equates the environment and its exploitation/ degradation to the female body which in this instance serves as the 'other'.

It is in the context of this equating/identifying of the environment/nature to 'Woman' that we seek in this effort to consider the issue of 'other-ness'. On the other

hand, Sefi Atta represents women voices as organs of National conscience and social consciousness. Her women like Tess Onwueme's are often presented as those who must mobilise social consciousness to confront injustice in society. Also, through their writing both the physical and psychological environments of African literary representations are reflected. It is from the writings of these two African women from Nigeria that we seek in this paper to discuss the issues of Environment/Nature and Social (In)-Justice.

Conceptualising Women as Other and 'otherness'

We begin this paper by a consideration of some connotations of '*otherness'*. Otherness may be considered to connote exclusion, segregation, *apartness*/apartheid. We therefore believe that Simone de Beavoir had this concept in mind when she said, "Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female – whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male". This simply means that 'human being' and 'female' are not the same but 'female' can work towards becoming 'human being'.

Thus, the 'other' who is the female and who, according to de Beauvoir is basically the "second sex" can easily become a target or an object of attitudes and negative behaviour like discrimination, oppression, abuse, subordination and victimisation. These attitudes, and negative behaviour towards women, have become the motivation of much feminist writing. Sefi Atta's writing for instance often advocates the "cause of women's emancipation in all realms of life" (Jyothirmai & Ramesh 56). All feminist writing is committed to this cause.

'Otherness' is constructed socially through exclusion and this exclusion is carried out through patriarchal relations in all spheres of life; social, cultural and economic ("Feminist Theory" 14). Exclusion amounts to separation and segregation. These in turn lead to subordination and oppression. In this effort therefore we attempt to discuss the works of two female writers from Nigeria; Sefi Atta and Tess Onwueme. Both Sefi Atta and Tess Onwueme portray and attempt to portray women as 'other' by 'constructing' and presenting women who rise from or attempt to come out of the place of 'otherness' and victimhood to become women of 'substance' with both voice and agency. Having acquired voice and empowerment themselves, through their education and exposure, they seem to be set to 'equip' and educate other women through their writings for social relevance and agency in their generation and age. Both are topical and adept in their approach to handling contemporary issues that plague our societies, both locally and globally. Such issues like patriarchy, (in)justice, gender-relations, under-development, and history (to mention a few).

As contemporary women writers, they have proved themselves to be committed feminists who take seriously the challenges of being female and being 'other' in our contemporary world. To be in the class of 'other' means you do not count, and anything can be done to you by way of injustice, abuse, oppression subjugation, and so on. For, as observed rightly by de Beauvior, "this has always been a man's world, and none of the reasons hitherto brought forward of this fact have seemed adequate" (64). This notion of 'this world being a man's world' is what feminists like Onwueme and Atta challenge in their writings. In another space (a conference paper), this writer had pointed out in a study of Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come,* where attention was drawn to an over-

arching presentation of a patriarchal society as an illustration of 'apartheid' which can rightly be described as domestic apartheid.

In this effort, we hope to take a look at both Atta and Onwueme as they tackle and illustrate the issue of "Women as other" in their respective works majorly, Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and Onwueme's *What Mama Said.* These works can very easily come under any recommended book-list for an academic 'Women Studies Programme'. This is partly because Women Studies is "both a field of enquiry and a political practice" (Robinson & Richardson xiv). That is to say that it is the flip-side of Feminism with which it shares concerns and goals. The two Nigerian women under this study have proven to embody and fulfil these aspects of Women Studies/Feminism in both scholarship and feminist activism.

Tess Onwueme in *What Mama Said* raises issues of (under) development and environmental degradation through creating images of the land (nature, the environment); abused and exploited but also personified in womanhood. The story of the land (vandalised, exploited and abused) is also the story of womanhood; women vandalised, abused and exploited. Sefi Atta, on the other hand, in *Everything Good Will Come,* presents various women in exploited social circumstances and situations. She juxtaposes them collectively with the central character whose growth and education becomes a symbol of women emancipation and empowerment through education and mentoring.

Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* has rightly been described as a 'coming-of-age tale' since it begins with the prodigious life of an adolescent girl. Her dysfunctional home environment means that she spends quite some time on her own thus building/acquiring an independent spirit right from childhood. This independent spirit coupled with her father's nurturing and mentoring help to grow Enitan, the central character in the novel, into a sharp, observant, educated and exposed young woman who rises above the demands and oppression of the patriarchal society of South Western Nigeria. She also comes to embrace activism and becomes a spokesperson for women in the novel and by extension beyond the world of the novel. She thus overcomes 'otherness' and victimhood ('otherness-as-victim syndrome'), which permeates the lives of the many other women portrayed in the novel.

In the novel, *Everything Good Will Come,* we have characters like Sheri Bakare, who embody the 'otherness-as-victim' syndrome. Sheri is Enitan's childhood friend; who is cast and constructed antithetically to her. Their friendship endures throughout their lives although their lives are lived on differing and contrasting planes. Their differing lives and experiences underscore the important and central place education occupies in the lives of all, but most especially for girls/women. One of the points made by this work is the fact that girl-child education is vital in empowering and raising women out of a life of victimhood and ushering them into a life of agency. Sheri, in the novel, is also shown to have come from a 'dysfunctional' background but, because she did not have a doting father like Sunday Taiwo (Enitan's father), who prioritised education in his daughter's life; Sheri ends up as a school drop-out. This would make all the difference in the path/course her life would follow.

The disadvantages and plight of women without an education also come across in the portrayal of other women in the novel. The women in Sheri's polygamous home for instance are other examples. They are portrayed as women with low values and without meaningful life ambitions. They are exploited in time, labour and sexually, which is amply demonstrated through their relationships with their husband, their children, and with one another.

Sheri herself, though single, is also shown to fall victim to the enslaving relationship that is commonly referred to as 'sugar-dadism'. This is a kind of relationship in which a (young) girl is 'kept' by an older man, usually a married man, in a home he has built/bought or rented for her. She is provided for fully by this older man and, although they are not married formally, the young woman must provide to the sugar-daddy 'all' the 'services' offered by a married woman to her husband. In this relationship she cannot befriend another man and she is under strict control by the sugar-daddy. Thus, Sheri's body, time and mind became 'owned/possessed' and 'purchased' by Brigadier Hassan, her sugar daddy; to be abused and exploited regularly. This kind of assault involves both mind and body, although it is coated with an under-tone of an expression of love.

In Sheri's case, however, when the Brigadier attempts to physically 'batter' her, she fights back by slapping him, which of course brings an end to this relationship and deplorable arrangement. Girls who are denied education or who drop out of school usually follow a certain pattern of a disadvantaged life. They tend to marry early, have children early, and in most cases, they have many children. They begin to live in a cycle of poverty; they cannot hold a job, their children are ill-fed, ill-supervised and ill-brought up, usually also ending up as school-drop-outs, and so on. Thus, they live a frustrated and traumatised life. In Sheri's case this pattern is somewhat interrupted when she, by slapping Brigadier Hassan, opts out of the semi-marriage arrangement they have. She starts up a personal business and to some extent is able to escape her life of victimhood. Economic empowerment is another factor in moving women out of a life of subjugation and victimhood to a life of agency. We must commend and hail her courage in slapping the Brigadier, thereby ending the enslaving relationship. Symbolically and significantly, she was therefore 'slapping' out of her life, subjugation, subordination, as well as economic dependence and personal enslavement.

In this same work by Atta, we have the portrayal of other abused and exploited women mostly illustrating the psychological environment of the exploitation of the other. Toro Franco who has become Enitan's mother-in-law is such a character. She is portrayed as having a modicum of education and training and even some exposure. However, she has 'refused' to rise above the confining environment and circumstances of a domestic life highly controlled by her husband. Her only ambition in life seems to be fulfilling the desire of her husband and children, which fact has also made her an object of their scorn.

It is against the backdrop of this array and categories of women that we attempt to discuss Enitan as an example of women who rise from victimhood to agency through a refusal to be treated as the exploited other. Enitan started life as a victim; she was a victim of a dysfunctional home and a failed marriage. Growing up, she watched the

deteriorating relationship between her parents which no doubt brought a measure of fragmentation into her own life as well. Part of her life experiences included the discovery as a young woman with a supposedly close and doting relationship with her father, that he had sired a son outside of wedlock and had kept this fact from her. She thus suffers emotionally on account of the sometimes subtle and unspoken preference and elevation of the male-child over above the girl-child in African marriages. She also suffers being taken advantage of by the male-friends she herself has picked. She too, like her mother-in-law, had 'swallowed her voice' at a point in her life. She is quoted to have said, "I remembered also, how I'd opened my mouth once too often and thought that if I said another bad word another bad thought, I would remain childless, so I swallowed my voice for penitence" (189).

So, in her thirties, she realised that she was 'in a silent state". She held the same kind of views that most women hold in patriarchal societies and environments. Thus, she admits that, she "thought like many Nigerians that her priorities were best kept at home" (192); and also believed that activists ended up in prison (195); and so she would not get involved. It was a conversation with her father that began to awaken her from a life of complacent acceptance of life and its oppressive man-made circumstances. In a conversation, her father points out, "older people are afraid to talk, the young ones too busy chasing money. Doesn't the situation bother the youth at all?" Enitan answers, "It does." And he throws out the challenge, "Yet none of you are saying anything?" Later on, her father still raises the issue of silence from the women folk. Enitan belongs to both groups; she is a youth and a woman. "Women" he grumbled, "we never hear from them". Enitan asks: "Women? What do you want to hear from the women for?" And he says "Where are they? More than half of our population". Then, Enitan answers, "Human rights were never an issue till the rights of men were threatened" (196).

This conversation is significant. It is a conversation that would be tested when Enitan's father gets arrested. He was thus preparing the ground for Enitan's future 'induction' into (political) activism by another female activist, one Grace Ameh. However, before she could be fully inducted as an activist, Enitan had to undergo a kind of baptism; she had to be briefly incarcerated herself (218). While in prison with other women, she encounters various kinds of dehumanised, abused and exploited 'other' women 'bodies'. Their individual stories and collective narrative of victimisation, travesty of justice, abuse, exploitation by family and society, and so on, constitute a perfect picture of suffering as 'other'. This prison experience precipitates into her resolve to become an activist. Previously, she had 'articulated' in contemplation, "I wanted to tell everyone, 'I Am Ị Not Ị I Am Ị Not Ị Satisfied with these options'" (200). What options is she referring to here? Categorising women, she says, "By the time they came of age millions of personalities were channelled into about three prototypes; strong and silent, chatterbox but cheerful, weak and kind-hearted. All the rest were known as horrible women" (200).

So, these are the options open to women according to her judgment. This 'channelling' of women's personalities into prototypes conjure up a perfect picture of being treated as 'other' or falling into 'otherness'. So, Enitan "was ready to tear every notion they had about women, like one of those little dogs with trousers in their teeth.

They would not let go until there was nothing but shreds, and I would not let go until I was heard" (200). She had thus arrived at the high point of her resolve. Enitan's journey to activism is gradual but steady, propelled by life experiences and circumstances in addition to personal training and instigation by her father and later, by Grace Ameh, the female Journalist and herself an activist. Her father had taught her lessons in courage which would stand her in good stead in her decision for political/social activism (239). Grace Ameh encourages Enitan thus, "…but you have a voice, which is what I always try to tell people. Use your voice to bring about change" (258).

This is to say we all may have voice, but it is up to us individually to swallow it or allow others to deny us of our voice by the choices we make. When society tends to deny Women 'voice,' they must be prepared to give themselves that voice through making personal choices. Girl-child education and economic self-empowerment can be pathways to social and political inclusiveness and agency, thus, giving women voice. Both Grace Ameh and Enitan chose the path of relevance and inclusiveness through political activism. They chose to not 'swallow their voice' but rather gave themselves voice thereby moving from a place of perpetual victimhood as women, and as the 'other', to be abused and exploited to a place of empowerment and agency. They now had become effective representatives for the 'victim other', speaking on behalf of other women and on their behalf also; exercising their fundamental human rights to self-expression, self-realisation and existential relevance.

Time will fail us to discuss other works by Sefi Atta that are illustrative of our subject of discourse. One such work is her recent play, titled, *The Length To Which We Go*. In that work she presents us with a young woman who exercises her voice in spite of opposition and challenges to reach out to her community with revolutionary ideas through radio and later, through National Television. She refused to be silenced.

Tess Onwueme's *What Mama Said*

To extend our discussion on the subject of women as exploited 'other' in the face of social injustice, we must now turn our focus on Tess Onwueme. Like Sefi Atta, Tess Onwueme addresses contemporary issues/topical issues of social concern. Among such issues are issues of gender-inequality and the subjugation and exploitation of women as a social group. She is concerned about the plight of women in both traditional and modern African societies. Eke commenting on Onwueme's works has this to say, "Onwueme's works are strident criticisms of Nigeria but they are seen specifically through women's lenses" (9).

This means that women hold a special place of concern for Onwueme, and concerning the play with which we are here concerned we dare declare that the critical issues concerning Nigeria are seen through the 'bodies' of women. Women are portrayed in the play *What Mama Said* as the 'dominant' players as they are shown as a representation of the land/nation. The very names of the female characters in the play are names of geographic features of the land; Nigerian rivers for instance. Thus, we have "Omi" (which is a reversal of "Imo") a river in the South eastern part of Nigeria. We have "Hadeija" (a river in Northern Nigeria). We have Cross River (another name for a

Nigerian river) in the South-South of the country. Eke, in her introduction to this play goes on to observe that,

> … Onwueme has written this play which like her other plays is a platform from which the voices (of women) can be heard. Her plays are contributions to larger national, African and Pan African or International discussions of gender, race, history and politics (12).

Unlike what obtained in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good will Come*, where the heroine Enitan, needed to be conscientised, mobilised and groomed before arriving at the place of political activism, in *What Mama Said*, the women here seem to be already conscientised and mobilised for 'political activism'. Thus, from the very opening scene of the play, (the prologue), we see the women picketing. The action depicts a kind of awakening/turn around due to an emerging new spirit; a militant spirit when the wounded and chased around (that is, the subjugated, abused, and exploited) 'emerge' on stage "angrily, defiant, determined to be no longer crippled with fear or silence" (21). United in solidarity, they move to fight injustice, dehumanisation, victimisation, exploitation; all the things that had made them victims of 'otherness'. They have turned or are in the process of turning their experiences of 'victim otherness' into motivation and militancy. Indeed it is an awakening as the playwright suggests by calling women unto militancy with war chants and dances, "now women beat the drums" (22).

The women are revolting, against the hitherto endured stereotypical notions, attitudes and actions that held them down in life and society. Such notions and attitudes as expressed in the following lines "Women? Inflammable… hazards!" (22). The Shell Petroleum Development Company operating in the land is equated to "hell" in pun statements throughout the play and this 'hell' is for women; destroying the land which is equated to womanhood. It is the women who suffer this hell; when an explosion takes place, the victims are usually women and children. So, in **Movement Nine** of the opening scene, we see Imo in the market square chanting invocations to her ancestors to rise up and come to their aid; these ancestors are women!

> Rise up Mothers Ị
> My ancestors. Wake up Ị
> Your daughters need you now.

And later, Oshimi says:

> You know me, I know you. I Oshimi, leader of the market place, appointed by you, women of this land, to lead you with the assistance of Cross River. But this is not about me… or her, it is about us … us. Our world (138).

This is an indication that activism is supposed to be a collective and inclusive project for all women, globally. The fight is about 'our world' and about women in that world. It is about the safety of the world and taking up the cause for women's liberation

is about sisterhood. When she also says, "My siblings from many shores", she is referring to a global movement and the focus of this global movement/action transcends local shores, and goes beyond women of "Suffer-land" but includes women elsewhere and globally. Thus, in raising environmental issues of pollution and degradation, the land is equated to women. For instance, when Cross River says; "Not even the land is left. Not taken. Not polluted" (139). She also adds: "We are taken". The land is thus equated to womanhood; to women who are here shown to be synonymous to the land which is both "taken" and polluted. Consider also this line,

> **Cross River**: Ever since they discovered oil in our land, they drill, dry and fry us alive with fishes and farmlands all cooking in oil.

In one fell scoop, Onwueme seems to be raising multiple issues including gender, environmental, economic and human-rights issues. This perspective is later re-enforced through Hadeija when she says: "Why should you stand still, your voices chocking when you are oil and the river?" (141) In other words, you are the land; the environment; "… you are the heart and breast of the land". She re-iterates concerning the militancy and activism of the women in *What Mama Said,* Omi also addresses her mother and other women in a shout, "Mothers get ready! Sisters get ready" (141).

This is a universal call to all women to rise up and put right or fight the wrongs that fill our societies. So, again: "What did Mama say? Mothers, Sisters, Get ready! Ready!" This simply means: do not give up, do not just sit and watch. Do not just accept things as they are. Get involved in the movement to liberate the land, to liberate women. The women's weapons of warfare must be different. Women must employ creative, innovative and alternative strategies in this war-fare so as to avoid blood-shed. According to Omi,

> Mothers and Sister, you are not going to fight men with guns and bullets, with your bare hands and twigs? No, mothers and sisters. We cannot. Must not play their bloody game. For that is what they are. Bloody! (150).

The women are rather going to fight with united souls! Unity among women will do the trick.

> **Imo**: Our souls. United. Our souls Ị Our Spirits Ị Fight
> **Chorus of Women**: Fight!

The most important weapon women need is knowledge. This is spoken by Imo thus:

> **She**: The most important weapons we need is not guns but knowledge.
> **Imo**: Yes Wisdom (150).

Mothers must be taught the revolutionary techniques by daughters (151). Mothers on their part must be ready to be taught. And that is *What Mama Said.* In the women's fight

against injustice, oppression and exploitation, they must remember in the words of Imo in the play: "…remember, each one for us all". And

> **Chorus of Women**: Each one for everyone (153).

Equating women to the land/environment is also seen on page 80. In the following symbolism and imagery, "…no matter their height,… waves stand crashing at the vulva of the land" (80). Is bottom-power here being suggested as part of the strategy to over-coming male domination in patriarchal societies?

At the end of Movement Nine of the play, police swoop in on the women, handcuff some and lead them away. The younger women led by Imo, re-group, re-mobilise, re-emerge showing that the women (and their movement) are unstoppable. Women are unstoppable when they choose to unite. So, the struggle intensifies and must continue. The armed men throw tear gas into the crowd. The captives are led away, but soon the mob recovers; the girls first. They rouse the women once again (154). For the struggle indeed must continue.

Conclusion

From our examination of the works of these two Nigerian women, we see complementarity in both of the works examined. Whereas Sefi Atta focuses on 'drawing/highlighting pictures of the psychological environments of women's experiences, Tess Onwueme captures the response and experiences of women to life challenges, in creating physical, natural/environmental images of women in society. However, they both teach us that women must always strive to rise above their environmental circumstances, whether psychological or physical, rise above their restrictions, abuse, exploitation, subjugation and subordination. They must rise and take charge of their lives and serve society by becoming agents of change rather than victims of patriarchal norms and practices of society. These two writers have also proven that they are committed feminists. They confirm Salami-Boukari's submission that,

> African … women writers have managed to bring everyday life experiences into the academic realm where theory could actually be practically implemented scientifically through analysis and critical thinking. Through literature, individual and collective cultural history can be recaptured and released to the public (197).

Salami-Boukari also affirms Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's views on women writing thus:

> Molara Ogundipe-Leslie defines the feminine perspective of the woman writer as having two main responsibilities in society. First, the woman writer has to tell about being a woman. Second, she has to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective as opposed to what men have done so far (198).

Both Sefi Atta and Tess Onwueme have consistently fulfilled this mandate in their works. Sefi Atta is listed among African women who are focused on

African/Nigerian women's transformation. These women's "writings show signs of diffidence against many social ills that are hampering the overall development of post-colonial Africa(n)/Nigeria(n) women" (Jyothirmai & Ramesh 55). This is so true as illustrated by the above critique of the works of both Sefi Atta and Tess Onwueme

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