SEX DIFFERENCE AND GENDER DIALOGUE: ISSUES AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

Sex difference is a divine initiative that is meant for the optimum development of humankind. However, society has capitalized on certain characteristics of the sexes as well as exploited same for the oppression of particularly, the female gender. This work seeks to examine the social conception of sex difference; it also attempts to interrogate the consequences of gender signification and proposes that meaningful progress depends on the willingness of the genders to engage in honest dialogue.

...when parents find a girl playing with her brothers, she will be told to go inside the house and sit there, or work... If she says 'how about them' [her brothers], she is told, 'they are boys, they can do whatever they like, you're a girl, how can you think you're equal to hem?' (ASGEDETSTEFANOS,9)

INTRODUCTION

Human life is structured in relation to the aspirations and expectations or constraints which the society designs for the two sexes. Emile Durkheim calls this phenomenon "social fact" due to the coercive influence it imposes on the people (72). According to Babara Eakins and Gene Eakins, sex refers to the biological difference between "females and males - differences in the genetic and

reproductive functions" (4). The society has invented certain attributes around the sexes to sustain the ethics of each system. The male and female human beings are assigned distinct characteristics and are evaluated differently, depending on social worth. This work probes the nature of sex difference and interrogates its impact on gender relations within the intellectual space.

II SOCIALCONCEPTIONOFSEXDIFFERENCE

The society, to a large extent, determines an individual's responses to reality. Eakins and Eakins corroborate this position when they state that:

Our religious, educational and political institutions promulgate attitudes along sexist biases... patterned behaviour from our unwritten but ever present cultural files of 'what females do' and 'what males do' (5).

The above confirms the comment by Hess et al that "the character of our relationship with others is strongly influenced by the nature of our environment" (178). Their survey shows one outstanding consequence of fragmenting human being salong gender roles:

We become gendered persons living in a gendered world, thinking gendered thoughts. Depending on the culture, these gendered roles can overlap or be so different that men and women have difficulty understanding one another sexperiences (193).

This affirms Roger Webster's definition of gender as "socially constructed differences which form the basis of inequality, oppression and exploitation between the sexes, "(72).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that individual responses to reality are more or less external manifestations of gender roles which have been internalized over a period of time. A research conducted by Paul Rosenkrantz et al on sex role stereotypes reveals that the male is readily accepted as being active, aggressive, ambitious, dominant and independent while the female is expected to be gentle, emotional, quiet

or talkative, caring but insecure (291). Grace Okereke affirms this when she shows the differential treatment colonial education meted on both sexes. It stressed feminine qualities of gentleness and morality for the female while masculine qualities of "valor, fearlessness, boldness, aggressiveness, endurance," were emphasized for the male. Since education virtually prepared the female for the service of men, black women, both in Africa and the Disapora "have become late comers on the political, economic and literary spheres" (157-8).

As a result of this, gender ascription has featured prominently in both oral and written literature from the classical to the Elizabethan and down to the modern age, with the male presented as the voice of literary enterprise. That men control the public space is shown in their tendency to define and restrict women which is why the position of power is explicitly acknowledged to be male while subservience is a female attribute (Webster 72). This supports Helen Haste's remark that what each society prescribes as the appropriate role for the sexes becomes "the cultural theory of gender" and the female child in particular is expected to learn them from birth (21).

In essence, the male and female children are socialized differently: the former is groomed to be a conqueror while the later is trained to serve his needs. The prominence given to male traits as attributes that are positively valued has culminated in the institutionalization of male dominance. The female is planted in domestic space as a wife and mother, positions which according to Hess et al are sustained by the assumption that she lacks abstract thinking skills for public life when compared with men (112). This accounts for the centralization of male experience as universal and the consequent marginalization of female issues in most spheres of humanendeavour.

Simone de Beauvior examines the outsider status imposed on the female in her multi-generic approach to gender relations in *The* Second Sex when she insists that:

...humanity is male and man defines the woman not in

herselfbut as relative to him... she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other (16).

The privileging of the male, Haste adds, means that the female is identified as "need-meeter to others" (69). Jean Jacques Rousseau popularizes this in *Emile* where he advocates that the woman's educationmust be planned in relation to man.

Human existence, therefore, from its earliest time, emphasized the male- female dichotomy as scholarship in various fields of intellectual endeavour shows. In Judeo - Christian worldview, both sexes are created equal but the female is subsumed in the male as a result of the Fall, especially since an aspect of the curse stipulates that" [her] desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee" (Gen. 3: 16). Ever since, "the daughters of Eve" appear to be condemned by providence to dependence and invisibility, a motif which receives a temporary relief in the regenerative role of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the female as both the serpent whose subtlety destroys her male counterpart and the saint who provides the channel for the redemption of humankind is the greatest legacy religion has given to world literature.

This readily explains why gender theories from classical to the modern age maintain male power and female subordination. Whether it is the inferior position Plato accords to the woman or the absence of a rational faculty that Aristotle, associates with her, or the status of "a castrated male" bestowed on her by Freud, the female is confined to the world of constraint. This situation attracted the attention of women abolitionists, liberationists, feminist scholars and critics who gave themselves the task of reconstructing the female psyche and reinscribing her story by a conscious interrogation of the basis of gender signification.

Drama, for instance, from its origin also emphasized sex difference because being a component of ritual, the female was considered unfit for that sacred act. Thespsis, the first known actor in Ancient Greece was a male; and even when Aeschylus and Sophocles

introduced the second and third characters, respectively, (Brocket 82) to enlarge the plot and add the variety which the one - man performer could not achieve, female presence was seen as a violation of decorum. Even when the three major Greek tragedians later decided to create female roles, women were fixed in the domestic space as conflict agents who caused the catastrophe of kings.

Elizabethan writers like Thomas Kyd (1558 - 1594) and Christopher Marlowe (1564 - 1616) among many others also gave prominence to women's domestic roles; but it is to the greatest poet-dramatist of this era that we turn for the most pervasive illustration of a woman's influence in the affairs of men. Shakespeare's creation of Lady Macbeth as a devil incarnate gives an Elizabethan slant to the Eve motif, bringing to memory Helen of Troy and the Trojan war. In the Muslim world, women also occupy the lowest position on the social hierarchy. Gamal Badawi traces this to the traditional Islamic belief which alleges that women are a "degree" lower than men (138). Since traditional Islamic laws are patriarchal and patrilineal in nature, the male elite define Muslim women within postures of seclusion and exclusion. This is the subject of Fatima Mernissi's *The veil and the male Elite* (1991) and *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, two works which interrogate women's right in Islam.

There is no doubt that the unequal treatment of the sexes is socially determined. Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," an essay in his work, Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays explain this situation. He uses "Ideological State Apparatuses" (ISA) to illustrate how social regulation can effectively coerce people to willingly partake in their own exploitation (171-2). This is why the deployment of gender issues in literature, depending on the consensus provided by the society, has assumed an ideological position in contemporary scholarship. Indeed, gender signification has infiltrated every aspect of human endeavour and literature is invoked to maintain its relevance.

Interestingly, these gender roles were designed by men on behalf of women because the female voice was muted in literature

from the classical to the beginning of the, modern age. Yet this does not mean that women were not writing. Seen basically as "the angel of the house," the Victorian housewife wrote as a hobby. She used writing to express her inner aspiration as a relief from the drudgery of domestic life. But by the time she came to self awareness, she lacked" aroomofone's own," an expression which Virginia Woolf in a book by the same title uses to refer to the space and the freedom that a woman needs in order to adequately articulate her impressions about life.

According to Theodora Ezeigbo, the problems which follow the female as an inferior human being are rooted on the insistence by the society that "a woman's body makes the woman" (8). Thus, men use their privileged position in the society to exploit women by subsuming their selfhood in male designed mode of existence. They are conceived as wives and mothers and stigmatised as prostitutes or courtesans because sexuality is the primary index for measuring their worth. The institutionalization of male dominance implies that the female is expected by tradition to remain a marginal creature. Tobe Levin examines this problem within the Judeo - Christian context in an essay titled "Women as Scapegoats of Culture and Cult...."

Since patriarchy is a vital component of all cultures which cuts across race and class, black women in America and the Caribbean have experienced severe oppression even though their problems go beyond gender ascription. The legacy of slave trade and slavery depended on the exploitation of the colonized people, particularly women because plantation economy thrived on the violation of black women which English law, as cited by Leon Higginbotham Jr., did not regard as an offence (31). This was because Anglo-Saxon whites saw blackness as a sign of moral and biological inferiority. And despite the attempts by black scholars and historians like W.E.B. Dubois, Carter G. Woodson, John Franklin Frazier, to mention a few, to revoke Western myths about blackness, the pressure from the dominant Anglo -Saxon culture sustained the denigration of blacks in the New World for three centuries.

However, the exploitation of blacks in the New World

affected women most since they lacked bodily self-determinism. Patriarchy regards women as a part of the male estate; and so, women as writers and characters have confronted the status quo over their oppression. This challenge to male authority has produced Chinwcizu's Anatomy of Female Power where he inverts conventional definition of male authority, dismissing it as a farce. Chinweizu's position notwithstanding, Kate Millett's Sexual Politics identifies male power as the basis of female oppression and insists that the "interior colonization" which emanates from the privileging of the male has been passed on to successive generations as a natural phenomenon (58). Millett's work echoes de Beauvoir's exposition on patriarchy in The Second Sex.

Female exploitation is sustained by tradition because her oppression has become a social fact. This accounts for the veneration and vilification of women in all cultures and the resultant lower-social status that "makes them vulnerable to pressure or coercion in sexuality" (Sadik 3). For Nafis Sadik, the powerful nature of men and the powerlessness of women are socially determined. Consequently, feminist criticism began by examining literature as a male enterprise. Webster confirms this argument in the following words: "Historically as with class and race, literature has arguably tended to subordinate or marginalizethepositionofwomen"(73).

Bessic Head attributes this situation to the fact that tradition has entrenched male power by relegating to men "a superior position in the tribe while women [are] regarded in a congenital sense as being an inferior form of human life" (92). The superior position accorded to men sustains their patriarchal conception of women which necessitates the gynocentric re-interpretation of the male critical theory by women writers and critics. Emenyi et al (2003) have reacted to this phenomenon in their work on "Colonial Literacy and the Fixation of Women..."

IMPLICATIONSOFSEXDIFFERENCEONGENDER HI RELATIONS

The insistence on and the exploitation of sex difference to suppress an aspect of the human society, women in this instance, are fundamental to social relations. This is because the exposure to formal Western education has sharpened women's consciousness. It has proved that silence is not a virtue for women; a fact that destroys the Beti proverb which says that "women have no mouth" (See Okercke 1998). The myth of silence as a female virtue was utilized to muffle the female voice in literature so it provided the avenue for men writers to "utter" women. Interestingly, women writers have intersected men's univocal approach to rationality through their demythification of womens experience. As Monique Witting states, "It is when starting to speak that one becomes "I". This act the becoming... implies that the locutor is an absolute subject" (66). Speech in this situation is a sign of authority. It is a disruption of male discourse and an act of self-assertion aimed at reclaiming the power which the female lost when her voice was asphyziated.

Since feminism is a reactionary ideology, feminist writers seek to re-design the world in order to reflect women's experience. This, according to Cheng Imm Tan, consists in creating a world where "all forms of oppression and all forms of humans harming humans are eliminated." Explaining the new agenda further, she states that this "means we interrupt oppression every time we see it. It means recognizing our significance, knowing we can make the difference..."(12-13). This world is not autopia of escape neither is it necessarily a battlefield for the sexes. Rather, it is an opportunity for the genders to re-examine the basis of social conception of sex difference in order to explore avenues for realistic co-operation.

Gender dialogue is necessitated by the fact that women see their roles beyond care-givers and need-meeters to men. They realise that an awareness of their humanity places a demand on them to ensure that things go well for them as a group. This is because "sexism devalues our humaneness, our goodness, ability and power as females

and encourages us to compete to get male attention" (Stefanos 5). The issue is that sex difference has been exploited for centuries to sustain men's dominion over women and the later's seemingly providential ability to internalise and transcend suffering as a natural human condition.

This situation prompted the Natural Council on Women's Right while meeting in Brazil on 26th August, 1986 to launch a campaign against the suppression of women in the social system. Raising a voice of discontent, the delegates agreed that:

> For us women, the full exercise citizenshipsignifies of course, the right to representation, to a voice, and to our turn in public life. But, at the same time, it also implies dignity in daily life, inspired and secured by law; the right to education, health, safety and family life without trauma (Langley 62).

The above shows that oppression produces a reactionary narcism in the oppressed which is capable of initiating and accelerating tension in the society.

This is because the androcentric model of history and criticism has proved to be inadequate for the explication of women's experience since it has a tendency to exclude feminine issues from the centre of modern epistemology. One major problem that arises from the marginalization of women in public space as Ebele Eko and Imoh Emenyi reveal is that the male voice, at a point, became the sole instrument for telling the female story (170). This implies that the female is seen as a negation of the male; and so, her experience constitutes a type of subculture. Gerda Lerner has intimated that the women's culture is not a subculture because it is "hardly possible for the majority to live in a subculture" (52).

Consequently, the pluralist perspective introduced by feminism has brought the "monolithic model of rationality, authenticity and truth" (to use Haste's words 108) under scrutiny. Dale Bauer and Susan Mckinstry have made an insightful comment on this situation:

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The larger issue is the failure of a masculinized or rationalized public language (what Bakhtin would call the authoritative voice) that is split off in cultural representation from the private voice (Bakhtin's internally persuasive language)(2).

Since the female in literature is a male creation, feminist criticism has utilized the "internally persuasive language" to interrogate the authoritative male voice which sustains gender differentiation and its exploitation for the oppression of women.

This assertive spirit has brought the privileging of the male under scrutiny as well as producing the modern woman as the disenchanted individual. Consequently, the selfconscious woman in literature is often regarded by the male clites as an individual who is corrupted by Western civilization, even though the Ikot Abasi Women's War of 1929 challenges this argument. The manner in which illiterate women in Opobo Province confronted the British Colonial authority during the 1929 uprising proved that women's selfassertion is not an imported phenomenon. These women ensured that the taxation law on domestic items was repealed though they achieved that feat at the expense of their lives. This attests to the fact that women from Akwa Ibom State are the pioneer nationalists in Nigerian history.

Janet Todd affirms women's assertive spirit in her report of Samuel Johnson's analysis of gender situation which holds that "the pen like the sword was considered as consigned by nature to the hands of men." However, he confesses that" the revolution of years has produced a generation of Amazons of the pen, who with the spirit of their predecessors have set masculine tyranny at defiance" (1). The fact is that as women gradually move out of the kitchen and dressing room to the intellectual sphere - whether in Europe, North and South America, Africa, Asia or Arab nations, there exists a "profound sexual - literary struggle" in the words of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar because men insist on using tradition to question "the female talent" (184).

Therefore, feminism, which Judith Bardwick describes as "an implicit rejection of the lifestyle created by strongly coercive norms that define and restrict what women are and can do" (5) seeks to recreate the female story. Feminist poetics, according to Elaine Showalter has been divided into two distinct phases: the feminine criticism and gynocriticism. The former regards women as readers of literature and sees all literary creations as emanating from the male imagination but the later ignores the male critical theory and recreates as well as celebrating all aspects of women experience (Price and WAUGH93-5).

In practice, feminism depends on the context of human experience or the realities of each society for understanding even though the oppression of women is a universal phenomenon. Radical feminism advocates a female culture which subverts male culture exemplified by the rejection of heterosexual relationship. It is anti-men and popularizes lesbianism as a viable alternative to heterosexual relations. Radical feminism features in the works of Western feminists such as Virginia Woolf, Elaine Showalter, Julia Kristeva, Carolyn Heibrun, Shirley Andener, Adrienne Richamong many others.

The fragmentation of human existence into social groups has affected the nature of female assertion because Black women in the New World are burderned not just by sexism, but racism and classism. Thus, the intensification of gender oppression because of racial and class distinction has informed the choice of womanism as a brand of feminism which describes the inclusive nature of male and female experience in the black community. Coined at about the same time by Alice Walker, a prominent African American writer, and Chikwenye Ogunyemi, the foremother of Nigerian feminism, womanism accepts heterosexual relationship but insists on women's right to life and happiness, In Ogunyemi's words:

Womanism is black centred, it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism. Unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black men and black children and will see to it that men change their sexist stand(63).

Black writers and critics who employ womanism in their works include Zora Neale Hurston, Lorraine Hansberry, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Flora Nwapa, Zulu Sofola, Buchi Emecheta, Tess Onuweme, tomentiona few.

The entry of women into the creative enterprise has challenged tradition as the basis of women's powerlessness. What follows is a systematic process of naming women's oppression and identifying avenues for transcending same. This process has deconstructed male definition of women as well as dymythizing their individual selves. Male writers and critics cognizant of the threat that the centring of women's experience in discourse poses to patriarchal monologism have fought to retain the male voice as the "Absolute." The result is that the genders are pitched against each other, such that the intellectual space becomes the battleground for gender warfare. In Africa, Chinweizu, is a trial blazer in gender warfare; but Charles Nnolim fans the hot coals of gender 'isms into flames by his conception of feminism as "a house divided" against itself and as a "scandalous" affair.

This means that, women's right to speech and their commitment to retaining power over the word has problematized gender relations. The male and the female viewpoints in literary scholarship are plagued be varying degrees of insecurity consciousness; each group has shown a desperate effort to be heard which tends to affect the subject of discourse. This readily explains why Zulu Sofola bemoans the de-womanization of African womanhood by European and Arab cultures which have made "the Western educated African women of the new order ineffective, always timidly and indecisively stepping behind the men, and periodically making weak scratches at issues of importance". Her

thesis is that African women are not weak; they descend from the strongest women in world history because African traditional societies had male and female lines of authority (62). As such, she rejects the concept of patriarchy as it is presented by modern African women and refuses to identify with the contemporary mode of feminism even though she has introduced powerful women into the Nigerian stage.

From Sofola's conservative feminism (and that inspite of herself), comes Catherine Acholonu's outright rejection of feminism in relation to African woman in *The Punch* Newspaper interview (7). This position is fully developed in her polemically presented work, *Motherism:* An Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism. The problematization of gender relations suggests that women scholars and theorists are constantly exploring a grammar of possibilities with which to signify the multifaceted nature of women experience. Just when it appeared like the ground was leveled between men and women writers and critics in the print media, men have again developed a glamorous way to continue the female story. This time it is packaged through films.

The Home Video is the latest tool for the exploitation of sex difference to deform women; a situation I have discussed extensively in an essay titled "Women as Symbols of Patriarchal Capitalism...." This shows that gender dialogue must extend to the electronic media through the participation of women directors and producers in film production and marketing in order to stem the mutilation of women in such films.

The vogue for the commercialization of female sexuality through the electronic media notwithstanding, the print media has remained an outstanding medium for new writers to stamp their creative impacts on the literary scene. These male writers operate in the tradition of their fathers. Effiong Johnson's Son of the Land confines women to the "sexual ghetho of prostitution" and glosses over the role of Akwa Ibom women as pioneer nationalists in Nigeria in Not Without Bones by attributing collective female assertion to "masculine blood" at a time when men saw reasons to adopt silence as a virtue. (See Ekwere Akpan's book on the subject for a more revealing presentation).

For Chris Egharevba whose creative works echo older generation French West African novelists such as William Sassine, Ahmadou Kourouma and Ousmane Sembene in his wanton celebration of human sexuality, women are cast in the mythic paradigm. Within the surrealistic world which he designs for them to enact roles associated with chaos, he muffles the true female voice: but permits women to "thunder" out the Eve motifin a post-modernist language which tends to strip literature of its moral function. However, Stella Osammor's The Triumph of the Water Lily provides the first realistic attempt to initiate constructive dialogue between the genders in African literature. This is because both the male and female human beings are relevant to each other. The usual complexes which create gender acrimony in preceding scholarship give way to mutual trust and co-operation between the sexes.

From the foregoing, the social conception of sex difference has promoted literary dialogue between the genders. But in most cases each gender is constrained by the insistence on sex difference and its exploitation for the fragmentation of human experience. Okereke gives an apt description of gender situation in her work titled "The Three Ideologies of Gender," where she remarks that:

> The patriarchal ideology is a maleconstructed ideology that... expresses a male insecurity consciousness constructed on what I designate 'gynophobia [the fear of woman].,. The feminist ideology is constructed on what I designate 'Phallophobia' (the fear of man)...(19)

Since both patriarchy and feminism thrive on chaos, the panacea for gender warfare as I have already said in my work on "Gender and Culture Dialogue..." is a synthesis of the male and female viewpoints because the pluralism of human experience imbued in the unity of the sexes is fundamental to the development of humankind.

CONCLUSION

Since no society can survive without its women, why is it so difficult for most people to accept women's complementary role to men rather than enforce sex difference? Tradition has done much to limit the sexes by fragmenting human life into gender roles. The greatest challenge before gender scholars, therefore, is the realization of a need to create genuine dialogue between the sexes. This goes beyond rehearsing old positions of power and subservience. Instead, the genders should engage in the kind of inter-gender dialogue which we find in Osammor's The Triumph of the Water Lily.

It is useful to recognise gender difference, but it is unnecessary to exploit it for the suppression of any gender. This is what Osammor does in her novel where she places human relations above the limitations, exploitation and the acrimony which the genderised and sexualized nature of our society bring on the sexes. In doing this, she acknowledges sex difference as a reality but utilizes it to create an egalitarian society. This means that women are neither spineless creatures nor demons incarnate; they are credible individuals. Similarly, men are not oppressors of women but partners in progress. Consequently, men and women, whether of elite or traditional background aught to accept each group as rational beings that embody nature's limitless resources on equal proportion. This awareness will not just foster greater understanding between the genders; but it will address the injustices of the past which were authenticated by tradition.

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