

RE-WRITING THE CANON: GENDER, POWER AND THE CONCEPTION OF OTHERNESS IN *INDECENT DESIRE I AND II*

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Introduction

Great literature is presumed by tradition to possess certain critical standards, which embody universal experience. But this raises certain questions: what makes human experience universal and who determines this universality? If aesthetic appeal is connected with universality, should individual or representative experience constitute an aspect of the canon? These issues, according to Robyn Warhol, point to the fact that judgment "is at the center of canonicity" (73).

Since men were the first to have access to formal education, the creative enterprise was for centuries considered a male space. This implies that the emergence of men as writers, readers and or critics links canonicity with sexuality, thereby making taste a crucial index of universality. Margaret Ezell's definition of the canon as what "the critical community considers to be worthy of study and also the dominant critical framework in which the texts are to be read" affirms this position (40). Consequently, the active involvement of men in prescribing and dictating literary taste has made the male experience "Absolute" while the female's is treated as an "Other".

Simone de Beauvoir validates this argument when she remarks that "... humanity is male and man defines the woman not in herself but as relative to him..." (16). This explains why the orthodox canonical text has a setting in which the female experience is excluded, if not given a footnote. The rationale for men's monopoly of human epistemology is the subject of Joanna Russ' seminal work, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* in which she establishes a link between canonicity and difference. But since difference constitutes a threat to male power, the tendency has been to inferiorise the female experience through stifling gender signification. This task which male writers and critics of African literature have been labouring to accomplish in the print media has been extended to the electronic in the last two decades through the budding Nigerian Film Industry. The concern of this paper, therefore, is to illustrate how *Indecent*

Desire I and II exploits sex difference as a tool for de-humanizing womanhood. This is the continuation of my dialogue with Nigerian directors, scriptwriters and producers over the female story; a literary dialogue which began with my encounter of *Dark Goddess* and *True Confession* in the late 1990s.

Re-Writing the Canon in *Indecent Desire I and II*

The sphere for women in traditionally canonical text is the domestic space even though the sexual revolution of the twentieth century has empowered the female talent to question traditional boundaries to power as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar portray in their work. Nevertheless, the presentation of women in male canonical works, whether in print or the electronic media uphold socially designed roles for the sexes which configure women primarily as wives, mothers, prostitutes or courtesans. This classification is based on gender, a social construct which Robyn Wiegman and Elena Glasberg refer to as "the roles (not the anatomy or biology) of individuals by differentiating between two opposed sets of characteristics, social positions, and personality traits: masculine and feminine" (400). Gender has served as the basis for the dramatization, protection and projection of the politics of men's interest.

Though *Indecent Desire I and II* retains aspects of women's identity under patriarchy - housewifery and motherhood, it nevertheless, confines men to the body. Chief Nwokedi, for instance, is a prostitute of repute who also has a family life. As such, he enjoys warmth from his family simultaneously with his escapades with courtesans. That is why he is the embodiment of human depravity in its worst form and the tragedy, which attains a mind whose sensibility is corroded by pleasure in its pervaded form. His inhumanity is revealed through the emotional widow called "beautiful."

But this is not necessarily a concept of beauty but a distortion of reality to accommodate man both as a predator and a conqueror. Within this scenario, the drama of immanence presented by Kachi, the wife to Chief Nwokedi's only son, Frank, and her mother spells doom. This is because morality combines with silence to puncture their consciousness while Chief Nwokedi's conquistadorial nature exerts power over their destiny. Morality, as Emilia Oko puts it, "is not the narrow code of social expectation but that truth to self that at the same time does not deny the autonomy of the other" (68). But to what extent does "the truth to self"

defend a victim like Kachi from the politics in male power space, particularly in a society, which relishes female adultery but sanctions male sexual gregariousness?

It is the contradiction imbued in this patriarchal duplicity, which poses as the greatest threat to the realization of Kachi's dream of conjugal bliss with Frank and the eventual "fixing" of Isabella, Chief Nwokedi's mistress, as Frank's new wife. Kachi's only route to Frank's life, Chief Nwokedi insists, is through his chest; and because Kachi's rejection of this offer challenges male power, she like most assertive women in the male canon is branded a witch.

But since women are seen as "scapegoats of culture and cult" to use Tobe Levin's words, she is also accused of "waist weakness" or prostitution. This is because male honour in patriarchy depends on female chastity, "Kachi's expulsion from her matrimonial home with Frank's pregnancy and the deployment of Ebuka by her father-in-law to end the relationship are sanctions from the social system. This segment recreates the Eve Motif because the prospect of a political appointment as the Commissioner for Sports propels Ebuka to "do anything" Chief Nwokedi demands.

It is not surprising; therefore, that Kachi who was sent to her grand mother in the village to reconstruct her life is tricked into a false appointment with Frank in Ebuka's house. This is where the prostitution theory is confirmed because when Frank arrives, he finds his heartthrob striped in his friend's bedroom. Also, used condom is thrown carelessly on the bed while Ebuka spreads his legs over Kachi who is in deep sleep from the sedative added to the fruit juice she was offered on arrival from the village. Convinced that she is a common slot, Frank leaves forever; but Ebuka completes the systematic process of de-humanizing Kachi by destroying the fetus in her womb through poison before abandoning her body on the street.

Implications of Otherness in *Indecent Desire I and II*

Conventionally, an aspect of the creation of the female as an Other is her association with chaos while rationality is often presented as a male attribute. This, according to Helen Haste, "is crucially related to the problem of otherness and how it is conceptualized" (33). Chief Nwokedi's constant affair with Isabella and her eventual marriage to Frank where she shares the same house with her lover - father-in-law and her opponent,

mother-in-law, is most representative. This gathering of opposing interests sets the pedestal for the deprived Chief Nwokedi to display his skill in conflict management or conflict creation while Isabella and Clara are made to enact roles designed after chaos.

Incidentally, the former anchors as the most visible embodiment of chaos in *Indecent Desire I and II* because of the hypersexuality, which informs her character. According to Montaldi Daniel, hypersexuality is the exhibition of excessive sexual behaviours, which affect both the individual and the action of others (1-2). Isabella is not just profane, but her world does not accommodate competitors. This is why she bewitched her mate for initiating insecurity into her relationship with Chief Nwokedi. This also explains the cold war between her and Clara over Chief on one hand and the battle between him and Clara over Frank on the other. It is the tension generated by the hypersexuality which Isabella sharea with Chief Nwokedi that sustains the multiple conflicts in this film. The climax of these problems is the beating of her mother-in-law to death. But since power is a constant for men in patriarchy, Chief Nwokedi hurriedly buries his wife, attributing her death to Heart Attack though he rebuffs Frank's suggestion of an autopsy because he suspects something sinister about his mother's death.

The process of inverting the Eve motif which makes Chief Nwokedi and Ebuka to play the role of the serpent should have deconstructed the power relation that reserves the position of the subject for men. Yet Okwy Ezike and Ojiofor Ibeziakor who creates the story and Ojiofor Ibeziako who handles the screen-play as well as Ndubuisi Okoh who directs this film, explore human depravity in the masculine gender; but retain power and rationality in their male characters while plunging their female counterparts, including the most credible though fractured character, Kachi, into various degrees of submergence.

Apart from the innovation or duplicity of assigning power to otherness in men, the masculinist imagination and its zeal to tell the female story reaches the peak in the attempt to create a female role model in Kachi and yet condemn her to stupor. She initially possesses the consciousness that Obinna has in Zulu Sofola's *The Showers*, but because men "lack the natural capacity to make woman the center of sustained meaningful enquiry" as Oko opines, (68), she is circumscribed and made a building block in a male story. This is why the consciousness of a young lady who maintains the sanctity of marriage and asserts her

individuality over her father-in-law's debased humanity gradually deems into passivity, the "one attribute" as I have said in "Sisterhood and Power..." that "the patriarchal social structure needs to sustain itself" (8).

The transformation from awareness into inactivity popularizes marriage as the only means of achieving personal fulfillment and social relevance. Therefore, marriage in *Indecent Desire I and II* is a product of mental manipulation and personal torture (for Kachi) and a tool for economic and sexual escapades (for Isabella). But the application of the label "known witch and prostitute" to Kachi is exploited to change her identity and alter her perception of reality. It does not just asphyxiate her voice by making silence a female virtue, but it utilizes tears as a trademark. This male designed passivity is what compels Kachi to keep her experiences with Chief Nwokedi from his son, Frank, who is on a six-month programme in the United Kingdom.

It is indeed, an "improbable possibility" and inconsistent with the plot-structure of the story for Kachi to choose silence as a strategy for survival in this instance, except she has misgivings about her relationship. But the creators of the story, the screenplay writer and the director seem persuaded in their construction of Kachi whom they think has no other life outside marriage. This is the hazard the artistic imagination undergoes when the artist tends to impose him/herself on the subject of discourse. As a result, the creative impulse is punctured and realism is brought under scrutiny. Eko and Emenyi have examined other dimensions to this problem in their essay, "Female Portraiture in Nigerian Films".

The denial of an independent personality to Kachi from "the only man she loves" - Frank, and Ebuka's ability to locate her in the grandmother's house in the village instead of her husband are where the masculinist imagination expiates itself both in logic and creativity. However, when the hope of meeting Frank eventually unites with ardent want to crush her will, she develops an apocalyptic vision. This is understandable because "feminization of poverty," according to Emenyi has always been a means of exploiting female sexuality in the works of male writers and artists (93-4). But the despondency which is associated with Kachi's concept of God runs parallel to the support He provides as "an Ever Present Help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1) to those who understand that human initiatives are raw materials for divine intervention.

But the resignation that Kachi's apocalyptic vision produces denies her the prospect of physical fulfillment, but validates the triumph of evil over good. Therefore, the transcendence she presumes to have as she

seeks spiritual redemption in the nudity of her mind, a situation which recalls a similar action by Joy in *True Confession* does not sustain our disbelief. This is because the creators of Kachi's role rely heavily on the stereotype of the woman as the "patient sufferer". But when her expectation from heterosexual relationship fails, she takes the oath of celibacy, almost like what Ahmed Yerima does through the character, Soun in his play, *The Sisters*.

The presentation of women as victims is fundamental to our critique of avenues and media which the society exploits women in *Indecent Desire I and II*. For instance, camera shots are arranged to circumvent the story, such that prominence is given to many aspects of the subject which debase womanhood. This is shown in the preponderance of Close Up (CU) shots, Peak Close Up (PCU) shots, Master Shot (MS) shots and Extreme Close Up (ECU) shots to reveal the actions of women in the film; particularly in presenting parts of Isabella's face, her jewellery, and her eyes. The cameraman has achieved this through the low camera angle; but most often, prominent actions by men are portrayed mostly with Medium Close Up (MCU) shots, occasional close up shots and through a panoramic view of the set. As such, the Camera Man under the instruction of the film director has carefully selected shots that tell the story from a genderized perspective.

Conclusion

If the male canon conceives life as a one-dimensional instrument for women in the electronic media, this perception is necessitated by his position as a conqueror on the social hierarchy. But after the sexual revolution of the twentieth century, the monologic male voice has been brought under scrutiny. This is why women who understand gender issues in African gender politics need to engage male script writers and producers as well as female script writers and directors who have been socialized to participate actively in their mental fixation in a dialogue in the electronic media over the debasement of women in Nigerian films. There is evidence that the inter-gender dialogue which Flora Nwapa initiated in the print media with her novels - *Idu* and *Efuru* has begun in the electronic media as the insightful directing of the film, *Ekaete* shows. But this is a tiny drop when compared with the proportion of patriarchal monologism inflicted on the Nigerian psyche through the film industry. This

has been used in the print media to challenge major assumptions about literary production, which relates to women's historiography.

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