

WOMEN AS SYMBOLS OF PATRIARCHAL CAPITALISM IN "DARK GODNESS" AND "TRUE CONFESSION"

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Abstract

World Literature, whether in print or electronic media is replete with the stigmatisation of women. No wonder an average Jewish male prays: "Lord I thank you for not making me a gentile, a leper or a woman." The new wave of Home Videos in the Nigerian Film Industry also attests to men's natural tendency to ascribe negative gender roles to women.

This paper locates "Dark goddess" and "True Confession" within gender discourse and interrogates the construction of women in these films as a figment of the masculinist imagination.

Nature has determined a woman's destiny through charm, beauty and sweetness, Law and custom may have much to give women that has been withheld from them, but the position of women will surely be what it is: in youth an adored darling and in mature years a loved wife - Sigmund Freud (Jones, 1966).

Introduction

The stigmatisation of women is a common phenomenon in world literature. Whether the setting is Judeo - Christian or Islamic, an "albatross" seems to hang on women as the marginalised segment of humanity. They are seen as wives, honoured as mothers; admired if beautiful, regarded as psychological wrecks if childless, condemned as failures outside marriage, and abandoned in old age. Their existence is determined by their biological function because it is assumed that "anatomy is destiny" for women. This is why tradition has confined them to domestic space and exclude them from public life for centuries. It follows that women are held in suspicion in many areas of human endeavour. The HADITH quoted by Fatima Mernissi (1991:1) testifies to this: "Those who entrust their

affairs to a woman will never know prosperity." The fact is that tradition exemplified by male power has reduced women to "second class citizens."

This explains why an average Jewish male prays: "Lord I thank you for not making me a gentile, a leper or a woman." The point of convergence of these three groups is the inferior position accorded women by the society. And for women, whenever they come to public focus, it is only as objects of men's sexual conditioning. E Jones (1966: 168) attests to this in his reference to the revealing comment by Sigmund Freud at the beginning of this work. Thus, negative gender roles have been exploited to mythify feminine issues; and in the process women's humanity is subjected to the forces of expediency and power distribution - two features patriarchy shares with capitalism as ideologies which uphold the suppression and exploitation of women. This paper interrogates gender presentation in "Dark Goddess" and True Confession," locates the films in feminist theory and examines their relevance to the society by raising some Afrocentric issues on the works.

The Perpetration of Stereotypes in "Dark Goddess" and "True Confession"

It is in the nature of stereotypes to distort reality through discriminatory attitudes. This view is supported by Oakes et al (1994:1) who describe stereotypes as the "collection of attributes believed to define or characterise the members of a social group." The presentation of women in "Dark Goddess" and "True Confession" is phallogentric because female individuality is submerged into "models devised by men" (in Iriguray's words). Tokunbo Akin Thomas and Mabel Joshua are wives who are cast in the roles of free women since they are designed to flout conventional beliefs in relation to gender. They are also conceived as courtesans who insist on female independence but depend on men for social acceptability.

So, they employ their sexuality as a means of economic advancement although their husbands are the victims.

Tokunbo and Mabel are two women who badly need abstinence but consciously undermine it in their public life. Why this insincerity? What stops them from making the kind of choice that Amaka makes in Flora Nwapa's One is Enough (1981): "I don't want to be a wife anymore..."? The heroines of these films have the privilege of sharing in one aspect of Amaka's experience, which is the realisation that their right to happiness is fundamental. But the decision to marry is nothing short of an attempt to give concrete interpretation to the myth that all women exist in relation to men and that every wife is the most vulnerable assassin of her own husband.

Literature criticism has been used for decades to centralise male power but feminist theory reconstructs and investigates male assumptions and speculations with a view to dismantling the dominant discourse of gender. Simone de Beauvoir (1949:16) explores the male thesis when she reveals that "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but in relation to him ... He is the subject, he is the Absolute - she is the other." The Directors and producers of "Dark Goddess" and "True Confession" confine women to the body by using them to promote chaos while men are shown as rational individuals even when their character sustains the vices in the social system.

Probably this justifies the casual attention paid to the misdeeds of men in "Dark Goddess" and "True Confession" and gives credence to the ability of patriarchy both to design labels for women, and to enforce these labels on them through the presentation of women as conflict models in society. If there is nothing sinister to it, why is the affair between Fred Akin Thomas and Agnes Johnson mentioned in passing? Why the pretension of a possibility for peaceful co-existence between Mabel Joshua and her house maid, co-wife, Morraine? Of what relevance we should ask, is Tokunbo's courtship and eventual marriage to Fred apart from portraying her in the light of a smart opportunist?

Against the background of men's "Absolute" power to define women, Fred's economic and political links with Washington D. C. are acceptable even though they determine and control the consciousness of the masses. And in an obvious patriarchal tone, Joshua instructs Morraine: "When you finish what you are doing, see me in the bedroom" and gets a willing "Yes Sir" as her response. Again, men's power to chart the course of events passes almost without notice when Mabel's boyfriend disappears with three lorry-loads of the items which she looted from Joshua's house. Or could it be a contrived attempt at poetic justice? Even when Rapheal refuses to move out of Mabel's house, the play within a play is acted out by his wife. Where does she get the power to restrain Mabel who paid her bride price from the property in question without the consent of her husband? Does her frantic disposition when contrasted with her husband's taciturnity not affirm the stereotype of the assertive woman as a mad person?

Since the route to rational justice is controlled by men, it is true even as Helen Haste (1993:5) intimates that women are always irrationally excluded. And so "women and the feminine - are caught in this scenario as the antithesis..." it is not surprising that Tokunbo and Mabel are negated as the archetypal Eve. But contrasting with this are the stereotypes of Mabel as "the Angel of the house," while Joy and Fadike are wives who are baptised in the fire of patriarchal contradictions. As long as Mabel abdicates her domestic and sexual obligations to Joshua, Morraine is available as the good-time girl whose naivety combines

appropriately with docility to make her the ideal women in tradition. And with stupendous mastery, Joy and Fadike lose almost everything they worked for through the duplicity of fellow women. No wonder Kate Millet (1972:52) sees in the "mythic version of the female as the cause of human suffering .. the most crucial argument of the patriarchal tradition" (my emphasis).

The Objectification of Women in the Mass Media

Although recent research on African women Studies Catherine Acholonu's (1994) *Motherism...* for example has played down on the role of patriarchy in the definition of women by replacing it with patrifocality which emphasises fatherhood, there is no doubt that patriarchy remains the major reason for the exploitation of women in most spheres of life, especially in Africa. This is because the "sexual Mountain," according to Calvin Hernton (1985:139) unites men of all races against women. Indeed, the negative portraits of women expressed in the media point to them as the most exploited group in our society.

We are very familiar with advertisements, jingles, commercials and news features that depends on ugly and sensuous remarks about women as market strategies. John Fiske (1987:183) confirms this in a comment from J. Davies:

The commonest type of advertisement is for products to improve the sexual power of the female body...These advertisements are obviously patriarchal capitalism exploiting the lack of self-esteem that the system produces in women.

This explain the pictures of elegantly dressed women in adverts for cosmetics and on the front pages of most newspapers and magazines. Even the calenders of beverage companies, manufacturers of alcoholic drinks, paint factories and oil companies are not left out of this trend towards display of female sexuality.

Whether the problem emanates from the fact that "bad news, make new" or the belief that feminine issues make news, the conclusions are just too simplistic if we examine the positive roles women have played in Nigeria and other countries. The media should be primarily involved with recreating social issues for the benefit of the society and not to misrepresent lived reality. In fact, the pleasure which the television gives should be defined by the society because there is no responsibility that creative artists have that supercedes their duty as the custodians of social values and normative behaviours in society. Hadija Yusuf (1991:64) attests to this when she states that "the media is vital in attitude formation and deciding what issues the public accepts as topical." This is why the incessant portrayal of women as a frivolous lot while neglecting serious issues about them amounts to destructive publicity. If nudity, crime and pettiness are false reflections of women, then the use

of women to 'brighten' some Sunday Newspapers are the exclusive products of the male imagination. This notwithstanding, the mass media is an indispensable prop for communicating government policies and socialising people into the belief systems of their culture; yet in doing these, women should not be the scapegoats on the altar of information explosion.

"Dark Goddess" and "True Confession" are examples of how the electronics media explores the exigencies of the time to shape public opinion. Speaking on the impact of the media, particularly the television, Jerry Mander (1977:13) says: "It is possible to speak through media directly into people's heads and then, like some other worldly magician, leave images inside that can cause people to do what they might otherwise never have thought to do". Tom Burns (1977:44) affirms this truth when he maintains that mass communication has immense potentials for "influencing, and possibly even controlling or directing public opinion." Therefore, the writer and directors of "Dark Goddess" and "True Confession" have misdirected the Nigerian public on the role of women through the lead characters in their works.

This is because the dividing line between the world of fiction and reality is very thin. Fiske (1987:151) remarks that "character portrayal on television works to deny the difference between the real and the representation in both the production and reception processes". Therefore, Tokunbo and Mabel as creative portraits, reflects the masculine sensibility. They are designed by men to satisfy the mind of the society and to shape public opinion on women. In a seminar paper, Seiter et al (1987) confirm that women openly admit "their delight in following soap operas as stories of female transgressions which destroys...the priority and sacredness of the family " Perhaps this is why Tokunbo and Mabel go on random elimination of female roles-for examples the rejection of mother hood and the destruction of their husband-in an attempt to challenge patriarchal domination.

Patriarchy as the dominant ideology in the society restricts women to a position of powerlessness and subjugation. It is for this reason that Fiske (1987:87) explains that soap operas offer them a temporary courtship with power by disrupting the ^{de}norm in the real world in their fight to challenge the status quo. This accommodates "Dark Goddess" and "True Confession" as films which portray women who are making frantic efforts to transcend social constraints by exploiting their sexuality as the only means to power. And since sexuality is the one thing which patriarchy affords women, history is replete with how they have used it against men. "Dark Goddess" and "True Confession" are Nigerian examples.

Because the dominant ideology is poised to objectify women, Helen Haste (1993:100-1) divulges that feminist scholars have in their agenda " to change the

power relations between the sexes... relocating the definition of self out of a male perspective into a female perspective." How shall this happen?⁷ The kind of dialogic struggle which greeted the emergence of women writers in the print media should be expected in the electronic media through female directors and producers. The importance of this Kate Millet (1972:58) posits is because "patriarchy's greatest psychological weapon is... its successful habit of passing itself off as nature." Certainly, nothing differentiates Tokunbo and Mabel from the heroines of Cyprian Ekwenzi's *Jagua Nana* (1961) and *Jagua Nana's Daughter* (1986). The uniting factor is that their independence is stigmatised since the search for freedom depends on social prescriptions. So, the thematic and stylistic features of "Dark Goddess" and "True Confession" reflect the determinism which informs gender roles for female characters in fiction.

"Dark Goddess" and True Confession": An Afrocentric Comment

The heroines of these films have launched an offensive on the social system because they want to dismantle the structure of male dominance. But in doing this, their directors and producers forget Robert Warshaw's (1964:xxvii) expert advice which though given three decades ago has retained its relevance. The movie, he says should display "an important element in (your) own cultural life, an element with its own qualities and interesting in its own terms and neither esoteric nor alien". David-Cook (1977:177) supports this when he adds that the artist should resist "mechanical pressures exerted by modern society to isolate the individual." Art is a cultural product and it is only natural that African art should express or propagate African values.

This, Chinweizu et al (1980:42) identify as the fundamental point in the decolonisation of African creative art. They admonish the African writer to operate from an African stand point and "not the Euro-American not that of some abstract CIVILISATION DE L' UNIVERSAL (Authors' Emphasis). After centuries of political, economic and cultural denigration, it is necessary for Africa to be the most central issue in African art. And again, creative works from Africa should not just reflect African world view, they should protect and defend her from the imposition of an alien culture on the Africa consciousness.

The commitment to Africa in all spheres of human endeavour has manifested itself in an ideology called Afrocentricity. According to Kariamu Welsh (1980:3), Afrocentricity is "African values created, reconstructed... it is the clarity and focus through which black people must see the world in order to escalate." Our understanding is that African people have rich cultural value which illustrate their history and conform with their historical experience. It is not surprising that Molefi Asante (1980:10) proclaims Afrocentricity as "our own story, our mythology, our

creative motif and our ethos exemplifying our collective will. Within this framework, the heroines of "Dark Goddess" and "True Confession" are social types whose major actions constitute serious affronts to the collective conscience of Africa.

Martin Esslin (1987:309) has associated "the creation of authority figure in a world where they are conspicuously absent in reality" to myths which are socially relevant to the culture in which they are created. But since the myths behind Tokunbo and Mabel negate African womanhood, their roles in these films are socially irrelevant, for it is false to assume that African women have no history of prominence. What about the Queen mother of Ashanti, Queen Amina of Zaria, Madam Tinubu of Lagos to mention just a few, who despite their positions of power nurtured life and fought to protect other human beings against collective repression? Tokunbo Akin Thomas and Mabel Joshua represent the submission of the creative imagination to a Eurocentric vision because their creators lack the ability to probe the true African female psyche.

The home video industry is a commendable development in Nigeria, but as we move towards a culture which is increasingly "videotic", it could be dangerous if we forget Wayne Booth's (1987:414) warning to the media. He cautions the new media to change its characteristic forms in order not to corrupt the global village which they have created since they "cannot build a world community out of misshapen souls". Regina Askia, the beauty queen who plays Tokunbo Akin Thomas in "Dark Goddess" seems to accept this when she remarks in an interview with *Ebony* magazine (1996:9) that "the home video industry is a reflection of our society, of our values, of our very essence." If her assessment is correct, then her producer and director have their reasons for painting her so "dark" because the film is a false reflection of the Nigerian women.

"Dark Goddess" and "True Confession" are set in the metropolis so they mirror the cultural mix in the Nigerian urban centre. This notwithstanding, there are obvious importation of the atrocities of Hollywood or aspects of cultural imperialism on these films. The mercenary attitude of Tokunbo and Mabel reminds us of the mercantilism of the west and its negation of African values. Fred Akin Thomas sits over a conglomerate controlled by "Washington" from where he manipulates the people's mandate in Nigeria. In the same capitalist posture, Mabel Joshua wrecks her husband's business and destroys whoever confronts her authority before eliminating the man. These sordid presentations point to the fact that globally information technology is moving towards a consensus approach.

Yet the problem this poses is the tendency for the elites to accept the "interior colonisation" which goes with this global phenomenon. This is where the directors and producers in the Nigerian film industry have made their marks,

especially as some of them seem to forget that the moral function of art transcends mere reproduction of sordid reality. Therefore, it is not enough for artists particularly the film makers to depict the realities of the Lagos low life. Rather, they should use their creative impulse to re-direct the society's consciousness by re-educating the people through the illumination of positive values.

This is why the exploitation of gender difference to confine women in "Dark Goddess" and "True Confession" to the periphery of life is a sad development. According to Theodora Ezeigbo (1996:74) gender discrimination is "the worst form of oppression the woman suffers" because it dehumanises her. In spite of all that Tokunbo Akin Thomas and Mabel Joshua acquire, they derived credible existence. Elizabeth Spelman has made a revealing remark on this:

To exist is to be a creative subject, not a passive object of the forces of nature, it is to be molding a new future through the powers of one's intelligence rather than being at the play of the repetitive rhythms of one's animal nature.

But then, the inhumanity embodied by Tokunbo and Mabel in the films under analysis is consciously designed to satisfy the male imagination.

Conclusion

The new wave of video films in Nigeria thrive on the economic recession which renders the highly skilled professional jobless. So, challenged by the need to be self-reliant, they "play to the gallery" by abusing the social function of art as a medium of entertainment. Ironically, the women who play leading roles in these films are graduates who for economic advancement allow themselves to be used by male directors and producers to degrade womanhood. This moral insensitivity is the subject of Buchi Emecheta's comment in an interview with Ezeigbo (1996:99) where she states in unmistakable terms: "As long as women are oppressed, there will be no progress. As long as women are hypocritical and undermine themselves, they will get nowhere.

Patriarchy is a diseased ideology which necessitates the reactionary stand of feminism as a discourse that subverts male voice as the absolute. Grace Okereke (1997:19) explains this in "The Three Ideologies of Gender" - the patriarchal, the feminist and the divine-where she submits that the last is the panacea for gender antagonism. She preposes that "when a man and woman become educated through experience in the divine ideology of gender, the self/other oppositional construct dissolves into a polyphonic consciousness." We are at the threshold of the twenty-first century and it will be unfortunate for a large proportion of humanity - women - to be barred from development. If men cannot see the import of this, women

should because it is the main avenue for checking the violent tide of "patriarchal capitalism" that is almost engulfing us.

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