

Modern African Poetry and the Issues of Gender: The Nigerian Literary Scene

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Abstract

The major engagement of this paper is to examine gender issues in modern African poetry with specific reference to the Nigerian literary scene. Critics have often paid attention to fictions and plays produced by women with very little attention paid to their poetic art. Obi Maduakor has studied the contributions of two Southern women, Catherine Acholonu and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, to the development of women poetry in Nigeria. Also, Aderemi Raji-Oyelade has provided an insight into the poetry of Northern Nigerian women. However, this study attempts to examine how women from these various regions have come together to form a whole Nigerian women poetic canon. This paper samples the representative poetic works of three Southern women poets, Catherine Acholonu, Ifi Amadiume, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, and three Northern women poets, Angela Miri, Binta Mohammad and Fatima Alkali. The study adopts the feminist theoretical perspective in its Afrocentric mode in view of its relevance to the analysis of gender topicalities in the poetic discourse examined. The study shows that women poets reveal a considerable level of concern for their fellow womenfolk and the socio-political and cultural state of their country in their poetic engagements. Thus, it is concluded that women poets have truly arrived on the Nigerian literary scene and have come to compete favourably with their male counterparts. Now, they have their own distinct voice in the Nigerian poetic canon.

Keywords: Gender, Modern African Poetry, Feminist, Nigerian Women Poetry.

1. Introduction

Gender issues in every discourse are usually sensitive; this is because they often generate controversies. This is visible even in the definition of the term, 'gender' itself. Often, people use the terms 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably, but scholars have since established the clear dichotomy between both terms. While the term sex is the "biological characteristics that define humans as female or male", gender is the "economic, political and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female" (USAID, 2007). Sex refers to the anatomical difference between man and woman. It is the biological distinction made between male and female based on six major components such as chromosome make-up, reproductive organs, external genitals, hormonal state, internal genitals, and secondary sex characteristics. By contrast, gender refers to the "social aspect of differences and hierarchies between male and female" (John Macionis & Ken Plummer, 2005:309). Gender is evident through the social world shaping of how we think about ourselves, guiding our interaction with others and influencing our work and family life; while "sex may be male or female; gender refers to the social naming of masculinity and femininity" (Macionis & Plummer, 2005:309). This simply implies that the term gender deals with the social roles assigned to men and women in the society. It is associated with the socialization process, which leads to gender identity, role and performance (Kehinde Amore, Gabriel Bamgbose & Abisola Lawani, 2011:204).

Gender is the space carved out by culture for male and female to operate in in society. The stratification of spaces is organized in such a way that put the men at the upper stratum and the women at the lower stratum. This paper attempts to probe into how gender roles influence the construct of modern African poetry. It examines the issues of women representation as it bothers on the factors of invisibility and inaudibility. For the purpose of in depth analysis, the paper is presented from the viewpoint of national paradigm. Moreover, Mobolanle Sotunsa (2008:32) has rightly observed that "African culture is not homogenous. It is as varied and diverse as the number of ethnic groups which make up the continent." This implies that there would be variance in African regional approaches to gender discourse. As a result, this paper focuses basically on Nigerian poetry. To properly explicate this, attempts are made

to proffer answers to these questions: Who dominates the production of poetry in Nigeria? How is gender represented in most male poet's works? What are the dominant engagements of female poets in their poetry? How do female poets represent women in their works? Moreover, based on the scope of this study, the feminist theoretical perspective in its Afrocentric mode is adopted in view of its relevance in analysing the poets' gender ideology in his or her poetry.

2. Gender Issues and Gender Criticism

It is pointed out earlier that gender is a cultural and social construct in society. Among most Africans, men have been culturally constructed as "Self" while women are "Other". These constructions are produced by the patriarchal culture prevalent in most African societies. Patriarchy is a culture that promotes phallogocentric ideology, which designates women as inferior beings and men as superior beings. Steve Biko (1986:41) asserts that "one of the most fundamental aspects of our culture is the importance we attach to man. Ours has always been a man-centred society." The patriarchal institution empowers man, who uses his advantageous position in the scheme of culture to subjugate, marginalize and oppress woman. Women in this culture suffer under "the patriarchal burden of male domination and female subjugation symbolized by an institutionalized lack of voice and choice" (Philip Ujomu, 2001:97). Chioma Opara (1987:16) explains that patriarchy is simply another term for male domination which is established in religious, economic and biological, even linguistic concepts for the sole purpose of demonstrating male superiority and the deemed female inferiority. According to Dodson Gray (1982:19) patriarchy is a culture "that is slanted so that men are valued a lot and women are valued less, or in which man's prestige is up and woman's prestige is down." This suggests that such a culture is a creation of man to subject women to various forms of violence and discrimination for their own ends.

The female gender often experiences inhumane acts such as girl-child discrimination, forced marriage, retention of a girl in her paternal family for procreation, widowhood practices, genital mutilation, rape and sexual abuse, wife battering, lack of right to inheritance, leadership discrimination, physical abuse, purdah, marginalization in education and employment opportunities etc (Bamgbose, 2010:108). Even in matriarchal culture, women are not excluded from these lashes of oppression. Opara (1987:10) observes that though the Ghanaian Akan woman is exempted from the patrilineal rules associated with descent and inheritance, unlike her Nigerian Igbo and Senegalese Wolof counterparts, she is nevertheless "weighed down by the Akan law of inheritance under the matrilineal system. Although, descent is traced through the mother, the woman lives patrilocally."

The advent of colonialism further valorises this patriarchal order, which cast woman into total obscurity. According to Iniobong Uko (2006:82):

colonization had little or no place for women. The positive of British colonization in particular, were largely targeted towards men. Men served as assistants to the colonial offices, interpreters in courts, workers in the churches, while women were condemned to domestic chores and featured only as shadowy beings that served the sexual and other needs of the man.

This maximum utilization of men in the colonial scheme renews their sense of superiority over women. The colonial value system prioritizes and recognizes man and condemns woman to the domestic sphere, where she is neither seen nor heard. Hence, women are excluded from the centre and confined to the margin (Uko, 2006:85).

Religion which is an important aspect of culture also furthers patriarchal oppression. In African Traditional Religion (ATR), women in most cases are marginalized in some aspects. According to Joseph Omoyajowo (1991:80), quoted in Oluwafemi Okunola, (2001:28), in ATR:

there are many rituals women are not allowed to watch or witness just as there are secret societies the membership of which is reserved exclusively for men. Where both sexes share membership of a society, the woman so allowed must have passed child-bearing age and therefore becomes ritually acceptable to the gods. Similarly, women, from the

impurity associated with menstruation are not usually “called” by the gods.

This shows that the anatomical configuration of women put them in a disadvantaged position in the sacred order of ATR. They are only integrated when they have migrated into what Filomina Steady (2002) called the “third gender”, the “agendered gender” or the “trans-gendered gender”, meaning they have the qualities associated with neither of the binary categories of gender – they have been “removed” from the anatomical qualities of female as a result of age and for this reason they can perform in the sphere reserved for men by culture and religion.

Even, in Islamic and Christian doctrines, women still face the same marginalization. Although, Islam considers men and women as equal as far as the basic human rights are concerned, Muslim women in different parts of Africa often suffer different kinds of neglect (Abdur-Razaq Adekunle, 2004:52). The *pardah* practice has been seen as means of secluding women from public contact and therefore enhances their invincibility through the politics of the veil (Opara, 1987:44). This has been the practice, although, as Salahdeen Adesina (2000:88) pointed out, the “Quran itself does not mandate that women should be completely veiled and secluded.” This represents another means of marginalizing the womenfolk, constraining their freedom of movement and limiting their opportunities (Kehinde Edewor, 2001:36). This practice is prevalent in the Northern part of Nigeria where women experience “double invisibility and double repression” (Aderemi Raji-Oyelade, 2004:4). Moreover, Christian doctrines also encourage women to be docile and be redundantly submissive under the rule of men, particularly their husbands. Women are however not given a space for performance in the fundamental aspects of the Christian religion. Gloria Anyanwu (2000:122) submits that “women are not ordained into priesthood by the mainline churches.” They are usually banned from religious leadership roles. This is what Moses Makinde (2007:287) refers to as “sectional religious dogma against the opposite sex.”

This gender 'apartheid' has given rise to the stereotypic imaging of women, which not only misrepresent them but also damage them. Women are commonly seen as “foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil” (Anne Dobie, 2009:105). Nawal El Sadaawi (2007:520), when highlighting some damaging remarks made by Tolstoy (1898) about woman, states that “woman is the instrument of the devil. In most of her states she is stupid. But Satan lends her his head when she acts under his orders.” In a nutshell, women are generally stereotyped as bad, sub-human elements, chattels to fulfil sexual needs, commodities and symbols of exchange, mindless, irrational, jealous, hysterical, materialistic, emotional, weaker sex or vessel, witch, she-devil, etc. (Bamgbose, 2010: 109). This explains why James Tsaaior (2005:62) claims that women are narrowed to insignificant space in the affairs of society.

These stereotypes, through which gender inequalities are justified (Tyson Lois, 1999:834), that have tarnished the image and self-esteem of women and reduced them to insignificant beings assigned insignificant roles in the order of affairs in society have spurred the women to challenge the male hegemony and assert their humanity. This is the major preoccupation of ‘feminism’. Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (2007:547) submits that feminism can be defined simplistically as anybody of ideology and social philosophy about women since the word itself etymologically stems from the Latin word ‘femina’ meaning ‘woman’. To her, this definition gives us enough leeway to encompass various types of feminisms. Feminism is a counter-hegemony discourse against patriarchy in order to create space for women in the male-centred world. Feminism as an ideology that promotes women’s rights begins in the 19th century in Europe and America as a result of women’s consciousness of their marginalization, subjugation and oppression; this consciousness makes them take bold steps in order to right these wrongs done to them (Sotunsa, 2008:2-3).

Chidi Maduka (2009:3-4) summarizes that feminism as an ideology has a long history; it develops with the ideas of “provocative female thinkers” such as Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Virginia Woolf, Mary Ellmann, Elaine Showalter and Michele Barrett, who in their own ways question “the phallogocentric notion that a woman is but an appendage to man, having been created from a man’s rib.” Macionis and Plummer (2005:321) also explain that feminism is “the advocacy of social equality for the sexes in opposition to patriarchy and sexism.” They further note that even though people who consider themselves feminist disagree about many things, most would probably support five general principles, which are: the importance of change, expanding human choice, eliminating gender stratification, ending sexual violence, and promoting sexual autonomy. Hence, feminist literary criticism attacks

patriarchal value system by unveiling the prejudices underlying the creation and reception of art and exposing how linguistic tools are used to promote and transmit the value of male domination (Sotunsa, 2008:8).

Mary Kolawole (2000:116) opines that feminism “is a controversial concept on the African cultural arena.” African critics and women writers often reject the term ‘feminism’ because of its western bias, which they find inappropriate for African socio-cultural reality. Buchi Emecheta (2010:345) relates that:

Being a woman, and African born, I see things through an African woman’s eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small *f*. In my books, I write about families because I still believe in families.

From Emecheta’s statement, it is evident that there is an African brand of feminism different from the Western brand in capital *F*. The brand of feminism is the indigenized version, which takes into account the African philosophy. This feminism in its Afrocentric mode has led to the development of such theories as *Womanism*, a term formulated by Alice Walker and later reconceptualised by Okonjo-Ogunyemi and Mary Kolawole, *Stiwanism* by Omolara Ogundipe Leslie, *Motherism* by Catherine Acholonu, *Positive Feminism*, *Femalism* and *Gynism*. The basic tenets of these African feminisms is that they advocate the complementarity between male and female gender, stress marriage and family as important social institutions, accommodate men, eulogise and promote motherhood and crave for peaceful and harmonious living in the society (Maduka, 2009:9-10; Chukwuma, 2000:109-110; Tsaiior, 2005).

Carole Davies (2007:565-567) makes some key points on African feminist criticism. He notes that African feminist criticism, which grapples with the politics of male literary domination, is both textual and contextual criticism. It is textual in the sense that it engages “close reading of texts using the literary establishment’s critical tools” and it is contextual in the sense that it locates the text in “the world with which it has a material relationship.” The world is seen as having its social value. Hence, this kind of criticism not only pays attention to content but form. Besides, he submits that African feminist criticism engages such critical activities as developing the canon of African women writers, examining stereotypical images of women in African literature, studying African women writers and the development of an African female aesthetics, and examining women in oral traditional literature. Since this paper focuses on the discussion of gender issues in modern African poetry within the context of Nigerian poetry, the first three critical activities identified by Davies are engaged; this is because they accurately address the question raised in the introduction, which this paper is set to answer.

3. Gender Issues in Nigerian Poetry

We have examined how men dominate, borrowing Jon Stratton’s term, “the site of power”, rendering women invisible and inaudible. This male hegemony also enters into the mainstream of literature. The presence of men in Nigeria literary scene is strongly felt as much as the absence of women. Helen Chukwuma (2000:101) explains that:

the men wrote about themselves, their wives, homes, their ideals, aspirations and conflicts, their confrontation with the white man and his ways, in sum, their society at large. They were the masters and the traditionally accepted mouthpiece of their women folk. But did they say it all? Can any being overtake the place of another? Can a male writer feel the depth of a woman’s consciousness, sensibilities, femininity, impulses and indeed her weaknesses?

Chukwuma’s provocative questions counter the male domination of the literary canon. She sums that such a literature is imbalance in nature; it is, in Monyana’s (1976:87) term, quoted in Chukwuma (102), “a one-eyed” literature that sees all through men’s eyes. Obviously, such a literature cannot see all.

In the area of Nigerian poetry, men have always manipulate this literary space in order to misrepresent women and cast them into total obscurity, although some have always engaged the image of women positively in their treatment of 'feminine' issues and other socio-political issues. This positive portrayal of the image of women is especially common in the Negritude poetry of the Francophone African poets such as L.S. Senghor, David Diop and so on. But in most cases, since Ngugi wa Thiongo (1981:60) has seen literature (poetry) "as a process of thinking in images [which] utilises language", men have always relegated women to the background using the tools of language. It is important to note, as J. R. Martin and Rose David (2005:16) have posited, that "ideology and power run through the whole ensemble of language and culture, positioning people within each social context as having more or less power." The language of Nigerian (African) poetry is androcentric, that is, it promotes the men's worldview. The prolificacy of what Nelson Fashina (2006:158) calls "Masculine Gender Elements" (MGE) in the poetry written by men underscores this point. Let us examine some lines from Kalu Uka's 'Fear', anthologised in Kojo Senamu and Theo Vincent's *A Selection of African Poetry* (2003:238):

The night grow colder and colder beneath
the blankets and I know love is always
a thing of wounds, of hurts and smarts
but fear my *countrymen* do not understand (Emphasis is added).

The use of 'countrymen' neglects the 'countrywomen' in the examination of social predicament that not only affect men but all. Also, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo in 'Song', in the same anthology, calls "By God or man" emphatically in relating his detachment from his lost friends - a loss caused by the Nigerian Civil War between 1967 and 1970 - whose gender are not revealed to us. This call sounds as if aside 'God', 'man' is another being of recognition. This generic use of 'man' makes the language of both poets male gender-specific, giving the 'woman' no space in the order of things. This language deployment in male's poetry makes Ama Ata Aidoo (2007:514) asks the provoking question: "Did we not all suffer the varied wickedness of colonialism, apartheid, neo-colonialism and global imperialists and fascism together?"

This inattention to women in Nigeria (African) literary canon makes them write back to correct certain misrepresentation about women and tell their story and the story of their people in their own poetry to show that they have voice and choice. According to Sotunsa (2008:30):

African [Nigeria] females were portrayed as a 'voiceless' lot who as a result of patriarchal subjugation remained silent victims of oppression. However, this portrayal is no longer the case as the imagery of 'voicelessness' of African [Nigerian] females no longer holds true.

The presence of women in the Nigerian poetic scene is not without criticism. It even got to a point that critical attention is not paid to their writing, but they continue to write themselves in poetry. Today, we can now say that the women have arrived in the Nigerian poetic scene.

Obi Maduakor (1989:75) observes that women such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Ifeoma Okoye have distinguished themselves in fiction and women such as Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwuema are slowly taking the stage in drama, but it "is in the area of poetry that the Nigerian female writers are still trailing languidly behind the menfolk on the literary scene." He goes on to examine the influence of such literary journals as *Black Orpheus*, *The Muse*, *Omabe*, *Okike* and *Opon Ifa* on the development of the two Nigerian female poets of his discussion - Catherine Acholonu and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie. But Aderemi Raji-Oyelade (2004:2) comments that:

Before Acholonu and Ogundipe-Leslie, the first notable female writer to produce a volume of poetry was Mabel Segun (*Conflict and Other Poems*), and with others like Phabean Ogundipe, Francesca Yetunde Pereira, Ifi Amadiume and Flora Nwapa, the first slim body of Nigeria female poets established an ethereal presence, almost silhouetted to a

critical enterprise which favoured and found connection with a literary tradition dominated, controlled and patronised by men.

In his survey of the development of poetry in Nigeria, Raji-Oyelade further claims that these women mentioned are the first group of women to practice the poetic art. Again, these women are university-trained Southerner. At the time these women were striving for audibility and visibility in the poetic scene, their Northern counterparts were still behind the scene. Raji-Oyelade (2004:2) submits that the reason for the Northern women lethargic development in poetry is that 'most of Northern Nigeria privileged Arabic education over Western education and [theirs is] a culture where the character of the 'woman' and the notion 'poetry' meant a contradiction of association.' Women poetry in this part of Nigeria is under-represented, in fact ignored. Until the second half of the 1990s, according to Raji-Oyelade (2004:3), collections of poetry by women are very rare. Women's poetry in this part is pushed to the fore through media like the newspapers, magazines and journals. The effort of "publisher-writers like Labo Yairi, Joseph Mangut, Ibrahim Malumfashi, Nana Embaga and most recently the sustained interest of Ibrahim Sheme" (Raji-Oyelade, 2004:5). His position as an editor of the *New Nigerian* newspaper and his establishment of a publishing outfit, Informart, in 1995 has promoted women's poetry in the North. Hence, women-poets from Northern Nigeria are Hauwa Sambo, Nana Aishatu Ahmad, Fatima Usara Hassan-Tom, Hannatu Tukur Abdulahi, Binta Salma Mohammad, Aishatu Gidado Idris, Celilia Kato, Maria Ajima, etc. Many more new women-poets are still coming on board. This justifies the fact that women "at last have a voice and in projecting it and recording their say, they have effected the much-needed wholeness of *Nigerian Poetry*" (Chukwuma, 104. Emphasis is added).

Shifting our focus to Nigerian women poetry, the question that readily comes to mind is: what are women saying or perhaps 'doing' in their space in Nigerian poetic canon? The rest of this article will be devoted to answering this question. The female poets under consideration are chosen from the Northern and the Southern Nigeria. Angela Miri, Fatima Alkali and Binta Mohammed are selected from the Northern Nigeria, while Cathrine Acholonu, Ifi Amadiume and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie are representatives of the Southern Nigeria in this study.

Angela Miri, a Plateau-born woman, who teaches at the University of Jos, has always expressed "a determination to be freed from limitations placed on women by African patriarchies" (Tanure Ojaide & Tijan Sallah, 1999:185). This urge for freedom from patriarchal marginalisation is evident in her poem, "Do Not Stop Me!" anthologised in Ojaide and Sallah's (1999:185-186) *The New African Poetry*. The stylistic configuration of the title of this poem suggests the assertiveness of a woman determined to break loose from her insignificant sphere because she "regale[s] in divine endowments/ to fire on, exploring until doomsday" (Miri, 186). The first stanza reads:

Do not stop me!
I burn
like the wild harmattan fire
burning uncontrollably
and destroying everything in its path
to clear the sloth for a carnival!
No amount of water or jet of liquid chemicals
can quench this thirst
in me for self-expression (185).

Here is a woman who is forcefully, "uncontrollably" breaking forth, craving for self-expression, a woman who never minds destroying the barriers that have been relegating her to the background for long. The image of 'fire' signifies this burning desire for freedom. This poet subscribes to the radical approach to moving the centrist male hegemony. The second stanza of the poem spans man - "someone there unimpressed" - with words. The last stanza objects the "room" sphere in which women are assigned and asserts her desire to "give control" in the public sphere because she has "let loose in the firmament" (186). The stylistic repetition of the title of the poem in its body also foregrounds the woman's quest for control and self-expression. Behind the simple language employed in this poem, Miri passes a strong message of emancipation for women.

Binta Mohammed is from Kano. She teaches at the Bayero University. She is the author of *Contours of Life* (1999) and she is a very active member of the Association of Nigerian Author (ANA) (Raji-Oyelade, 15). Her "Single Girl",

anthologised in *Vultures in the Air: Voices from Northern Nigeria*, edited by Zainab Alkali and Al Imfeld (1995:97), relates the personal experience of a single girl whose right to freedom is trampled upon:

She is single – they say
It’s a sad diagnosis
She is not allowed to defend
herself like others
...
Despair coursed down her cheeks
No right no mercy
To this spinster

The poet reveals the disadvantaged position of a woman in a patriarchal culture of the North aided by religious seclusionist dogma. A woman is not free in her singleness neither is she in marriage. The dilemma is “a farce!” according to the poet. Here, we are presented with a heart-felt plea of a single woman who “begs/You [man] to leave her single/Lovely world alone” (97). The choice of words of the poet is carefully marshalled to reveal the pitiable condition of ‘woman’ even in her singleness in a man-centred world.

Fatima Alkali is from Borno State. She studied at the University of Maiduguri. She is one of the female voices projected in Alkali and Imfeld’s *Vulture in the Air*, which is the result of the creative writing workshop organised by the Swiss Embassy, the Association of Nigerian Author (ANA) and NAWAO Productions (Switzerland) in May 1995, in Maiduguri. Her two poems featured in the anthology are “A Woman’s Lament” (61) and “A Woman’s Fate” (113). “A Woman’s Lament” exposes the slavish space, which a woman is assigned in the society. The slavish space is seen as her fate under the burden of patriarchy:

A woman
In the home, a slave of man
a slave of the kitchen
On the streets, a slave of men
a slave of lust
In high offices, a slave of resentment
a slave of slander
Her fate, a slave forever
A bearer of burden, a burden she bears alone (61).

The simplicity of the language and the repetition of ‘slave’ foreground the simplicity of women’s sphere in the society; she is nothing but a slave to everything. This perception of women accounts for the reason they are treated without dignity; after all, a slave is a sub-human. The second stanza, which is also the last stanza of the poem, comments on the psychological torture a woman is exposed to because of her ill-treatment in the hands of men: “for her heart a great torment/In the society she is less than a woman” (61). In slavery there is no freedom of will, desire, and action. The theme of woman’s slave-bound fate is also the engagement of “A Woman’s Fate” (113). Simply because “She is a woman”, she is “Enslaved by her identity” (113). Just because of her woman (slave) status:

She has a will
but no voice
A strength
Caged deep inside
But not discovered (113).

However, the poet offers her remedy to this problem of subordination and repression faced by woman under the bondage, symbolised by the word ‘chains’ in the poem, of patriarchy. Hence, the woman “has no choice/But to break free” (113) in order to regain her battered pride and assert her humanity.

Now, let us shift our focus to the poetry of the Southern women. Catherine Acholonu is, according to Maduakor (1989:76), “one of the new voices in poetry discovered by *Opon Ifa*, the poetry chapbook published at Ibadan and formerly edited by Femi Osofisan.” She was born in Imo and has two collections of poetry to her credit. *The Spring’s Last Drop* (1985) and *Nigeria in the Year 1999* (1985) were published by her while teaching at Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri. She is a core traditionalist and “motheristic” tendency often surface in her poetry - she coins the term 'motherism', which is one of the many variants of African/Black Feminism. In the words of Ojaide and Sallah (1999:169), her poetry “shows approval for traditional African values and practices as they pertain to women, especially in upholding the roles of wife and mother.” Maduakor (1989: 76) also has this to say about her poetry: “To certain extent, all her poems sum up to one supreme statement on the need to be rooted, to be anchored to tradition, to a faith or some kind of supernatural agency.”

In “The Spring’s Last Drop” (*The New African Poetry*, 170-171), Acholonu’s determination to uphold her motherhood status and the responsibilities attached to it for the promotion of African values is poetically stated. She sees those who think of motherhood as a disadvantage as people with “lost virtue.” She states:

I, Obianuju
I have learned to live in scarcity.
so, cautiously,
I choose my steps
labouring on the steep hill
bearing on my head
in a clay pot
the springs last drop (170).

The poet sees herself as the bearer of “the spring’s last drop”, the symbolic representation of the African traditions which are “dying” even with their purity and sweetness (lines 44-46). Even though there are distractions from those who have “lost virtue” as a result of civilization and modernity, the poet vows in her motherhood capacity to keep up the duty of culture and tradition propagation:

I, Obiajunu
I shall provide my children
with plenty
I shall multiply this drop

In “The Dissidents”, in R. Johnson, D. Ker, C. Maduka and O. Obafemi’s *New Poetry from Africa* (1996:4-5), Acholonu, using the imagery of the traditional rain-making act, which is attributed to “the daughter of my father”- the dissidents and the violators of traditions- condemns those “lost virtue” people to death in the hand of Amadioha, the Igbo god of thunder:

amadioha struck
lashing black fire
on the dissidents
earth sucked their blood
and all was still (5).

The strong imagery evokes the violence caused to tradition by these determined “dissidents” when they are still alive on “the top of the hill” and “the heights of the land” and contrasts this with the peace that takes over after they are struck dead. The poem reveals the vision of a conservative poet, who sees death as the price for the violation of cultural values and traditions. Also, in “The Way” (*The New African Poetry*, 169), we hear the voice of cultural Messiah, who yearns for freedom to save “the drowning child”, which symbolises African dying culture and “paddle [her] astral canoe”, which is her duty in safeguarding “the drowning child”. Of course, to the poet, “this /is the way”(169).

Ifi Amadiume is an Igbo woman, who is educated in Nigeria and Britain. She is an award winning writer who has two collections of poetry to her credit, *Passion Waves* (1986) and *Ecstasy* (1993). She is also the author of *Male Daughters*, *Female Husbands* (1987), which explores the issues of gender from the perspective of her Igbo culture. According to Ojaide and Sallah (1999:177), her "poetry is simple, candid in private themes, and exhorts women to be sincere and free in self-expression." In "Bitter", anthologised in Ojaide and Shallah's *The New African Poetry* (177), and "Me Like A Sweet Orange", in Vincent's *Black & African Writing* (1981:359), the poet presents an imagistic view of women, represented in the symbols of 'bitter-leaf' and 'sweet orange' in the poems respectively, sapped dry in the hands of men, the upholder of the patriarchal hegemony. This metaphorically represents the sufferings women undergo in a culture smeared with misogynistic tendency. But the poems end with the hope of recovery after long suffering. This recovery is a sign-post of the women's freedom. In 'Bitter', the poet persona voices: "you would not squeeze/the bitterness out of me" (*The New African Poetry*, 177). This optimistic voice is also resonant in 'Me Like A Sweet Orange': "My seeds took root again/And my shield in time regained/Full of sweet juice again to be sucked" (*Black & African Writing*, 359). It is noted in the last line of 'Me Like A Sweet Orange' that the persona is of the opinion that as long as there is patriarchy, represented in the image of "a boy", there will be recurrence of women oppression. Hence, the orange only grows juicy to be sucked again. This is the voice of a poet who deeply understands the politics of gender relations. Moreover, Amadiume makes a landmark statement on corruption in Nigeria in her very short imagistic poem titled "4th Witness – The Petty Thieves":

The eye sees, but not itself!
The rat says it steals,
because nobody has given it its own share!
We have nothing to lose now
for flaying cannot hurt a goat
that has already been slaughtered! (*The New African Poetry*, 179)

The poem shows that corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian society; the people in authority symbolised by "eye", steal without justice catching up with them. Even "rat", the mere civilians, now "steal" at will as a way of sharing from the national cake. Corruption now becomes the nature of the society, which cannot be stopped, though the damage it has done to the country is immeasurable. Amadiume is credited for the depth of understanding she possesses on her subject matter.

Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie is a Yoruba woman from Lagos. She has thought Literature for many years in a number of African Universities after graduating from the University College, Ibadan with a First Class Honours Degree in English. She has published a collection of poetry titled *Sew the Old Day and Other Poems* (1985). She is one of the foremost African Feminist. She coins the term "STIWANISM", which is an Afrocentric alternative to feminism. In the words of Johnson et. al. (1996:104), the "themes of her poems range widely from public and personal commitment to love and anguish. [Her poems reveal] striking freshness and clear expression of vision." Maduakor (1989:81) claims that the poetry of Ogundipe-Leslie is ambitious. Her poetry "labours after verbal effects and intellectual concepts so that one is tempted to classify her poetry as poetry of wit" (Maduakor, 81). In "Yoruba Love" anthologized in *Okike* (1981:36), the poet persona exposes the tricks of men when seeking the hand of women (spinsters) in love relationship, which is just a means to rid the women of the pride:

When they smile and they smile
and then begin to say
with pain on their brows
and songs in their voice
"the nose is a cruel organ
and the heart without bone
for were the bone not cruel,
it would smell love for you
and the heart if not boneless,
would feel my pain for you
and the throat, o has not roots
or it would root to flower my love" (36).

The poet claims that these elegant words are deceptive; they are crafty rhetorical expressions without any truth validity deployed to cage the women's heart so that they (men) might cheat them thereafter. Language here is a powerful tool engaged by men to 'colonize' women. That is why Deborah Cameron (1985:163) insists that language should not be viewed as an "abstract entity". To her, there is a relationship between language and gender. Language is linked to gender in two ways: "it spells out the connection on the one hand, between language and gender identity, and on the other hand between language and women's oppression" (Cameron, 163). With the awareness of this link between language and male gender hegemony, the poet persona warns the women (spinsters) to "run for shelter, friend/run for shelter" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 36). "Tendrils of Africa" (*New Poetry from Africa*, 104), shows the poet's concern for the deteriorating state of African nations in general and Nigeria in particular. This deterioration is caused by colonialism, which has damaged the Africans' soul and body. The tone of optimism saturates the poem. We can see "the smile flit over your [Africa's] cheekbones/Reach like a tendril to caress your face/in those lean days that startled" (1996:104). The poet asks a rhetorical question laced with "hope and the wish for the reconstruction of Africa's dream and history" (Johnson, Ker, Maduka & Obafemi, 104):

do you joy
that life does not slaughter our dreams
our secret thoughts on its butcher bench of time
that we gather to ourselves
the scraps and bones of our dismembered being

hoard to nurse them
that death may not out-stare us?

This poem shows Ogundipe-Leslie's commitment to the socio-political sphere of her loved Africa (Nigeria) and her vision that the "dismembered" African can still be reconstructed.

4. Conclusions

Men have always been at the helm of affairs in socio-political, religious, cultural and even literary sphere, relegating women to the background. With the awareness of this patriarchal order of things, women have been able to free themselves from the "chains" of inaudibility and invisibility in every sphere of human endeavour, hence asserting their humanity. The group of women studied in this paper have shown beyond doubt that women have gained their foothold in the Nigerian literary canon, even in the area of poetry, as opposed to Maduakor's (1989:75) submission, the womenfolk no longer trail "languidly behind the menfolk." These women have justified that rationality and literary/poetic imagination is not an exclusive preserve of men. Even in the Northern Nigeria, where women suffered double-decked voicelessness and choicelessness, they have been able to move the centre from their marginal positions through their poetry. Nigerian women poets have shown their commitments to their country and their fellow women in their poetry through different styles. Thus, women poetries have truly arrived on the Nigerian literary scene. Nigerian poetry is now 'two-eyed' since there is a balance in poetic perspective in which both men and women can now tell their stories and the stories of their people. This justifies the fact that these women have been able to fill in the gap that once existed between the menfolk and the womenfolk in Nigerian poetry.

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