

Violence and Sexual Harassment in Nigerian Novels: The Nego-Feminist Option

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Abstract

Taking advantage of women in most modern legal contexts is illegal. The unwelcome sexual advances have often been accompanied with violence of differing degrees. Such advantages from sexual abuse or sexual assault into forced marriages and to mild transgressions that include simple teasing, offhand comments, or minor isolated incidents in the life cycle of a female such as demonstrated in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976) forcefully calls attention to how they should be remedied. In the village of Ibuza, harassment is so frequent and severe that it creates a hostile and offensive environment for budding girls of marriage age – and a question shoots: what is the way out for novelists in deconstructing the life of such young girls as Aku-nna, the lead female character? While Emecheta takes the option of a strong backlash on the male class, new female writers like Ify Osammor in her *The Triumph of Water Lily* (1996) have made feminism to evolve by certainly bringing to disrepute the oddity of the male but in an amiable way that would appear to yield better results. This option of Nego-feminism charges both sexes to be willing-partners in progress. The option speaks in the monologic voice of unquestioned authority, determined by experience, knowledge and practice. Its dialogic (competing) voices speak in new official language and new official thought. In short, where the arrant feminism is a closed gender genre reflective of what has already occurred, Nego-feminism is open — to the present and the future. As such, the novel is almost by definition a progressive genre, which Osammor uses the different expectations that society holds for gender roles to twist the tragic situation of *The Triumph of Water Lily* into a tighter knot than radical events would otherwise permit.

There is 'pornography of violence', women, voyeurs, and witnesses while articulating anxiety blurring contact of two cultures: modernisation and tradition in Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976). 'Pornography of violence', a phrase coinage by India's Alok Rai in his *Inventing Boundaries* (2000:365), signifies in *The Bride Price* borders of rape in the display of caste system with its disturbances, or commonality that has advantages for injustices of the human world. Emecheta's novel impeccably demonstrates tribal residues inter-facing with modernisation and she provides a lead way for this violence. It is not difficult to see Emecheta's feminist didacticism in this direction. Her handwriting is everywhere in trying to show the way, if not too seen everywhere. We see the authorial intrusion in her exploit of 'pornography of violence', caste system and commonality. Emecheta rises to moralise, a torch-bearer as she bears witness on the African sociology of literature. Wendy Griswold (2000) argues that all African writers are astutely bearing witness to disastrous issues of the continent in their novels; writers are social commentators.

The nubile Aku-nna in *The Bride Price* (1976) is ambushed. Recklessness cannot describe it. In consequence, she is now a limp bride by her captors (pp.130-1) and later bleeds in her mouth from severe hit by her husband which sends her to unconsciousness (pp.145-6). But Aku-nna does not only face physical violence from her husband, he also prepares her for sexual violence.

While Aku-nna arrived at her new home heart-broken, half-conscious, in a limp, and half-clothed, the women of her groom's house took her in,

praising the smoothness of her body. She had not a single scar, and her hands were so soft. They giggled as the senior Obidi poured chalk, the symbol of fertility, on her breasts and prayed to his ancestors that Aku-nna would use it feed the many children she was going to have for his son Okoboshi. They fanned her and blew into her ears, but she remained weak and listless, so somebody suggested the local gin. It burned Aku-nna's throat so that she coughed and, and her new nurses laughed and welcomed her to her husband's home (p.139).

Isn't it possible here that women in this public spectating are their own problems? They facilitate the male-dominant/female-submissive dynamics here, in my thinking. Women are happy when a co-woman is kidnapped into marriage! Should this be? Anger and despair was not enough for Aku-nna because, Okoboshi, the new hateful husband, comes to her in the night to doubly claim his right. The marriage has to be consummated, and it all appears it has to be by force. Sadly, in a powerful, skilful, wrestling over-match for Aku-nna, Okoboshi

was on her. When she kicked him, he slapped her very hard that she was bleeding in her mouth. He made her to remember that a woman was no match for a man in strength. And, indeed, it was a mistake to think of overpowering her professionally trained wrestler. She should have realised this from her kidnap point when about twelve men burst into the night theatre (dancing arena for girls) and took her away on their shoulders, swinging her from one shoulder to another, and from one man to another into permissible captivity in the Igbo locality. We are faced with this act's implication.

Can it not be clearly supposed that tradition has glaringly triumphed over modernisation here? With all of Aku-nna's education, with all her dream for empowerment chances to be a teacher, for example, because she thinks that earning her own money other than the one rightly thought would fetch her parents good bride price, where is the glory of all that? Wishful thinking it seems in the eyes of tradition which triumphs in claiming her in the end over modernisation. She is now history to her dream, history to her man of choice, and history to the possibility of education turning things around for her and her family. Perhaps, then, westernisation has got to think twice in its boast of civilisation mission in Africa because here is a tradition achieving its desired results, taking westernisation by surprise. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* might have some relevance here too in positioning that Africa had its culture in tact prior to the coming of the white man, and there was nothing he was bringing to Africa other than a disintegration of the perfect culture. His position, we are told, is as much as what Walter Rodney in his *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* states. Rodney submits that the white man's effort in Africa may well be the development of underdevelopment of Africa. And, in the end, did not the nubile Aku-nna die? By this triumph of tradition over westernisation, it is westernisation that has been raped rather. While this episode treads the powerlessness of westernisation, it also treads the powerlessness of women. To be acceptable, westernisation needs to have a re-think of its mission in other worlds; for women to claim their power, concerted effort is needed such as begun by nego-feminism.

Nego-feminist Approach to Gender Injustice

Radicalism in claiming what is women's has its own advantages, but such, in my opinion, are misplaced. Rascality begets rascality pure and simple. Its glamour is short lived, besides the fact that no one wants to be associated with rascality in claiming what is one's, especially as it affects women who are correctly or wrongly seen as 'the weaker sex'. Efforts are needed to proffer ways for women to achieve their objectives without recourse to injurious methodology. Nego-feminism in this exact sense sets out to achieve just that.

Nego-feminism appeals to the senses of ego from both the males and females to down tools on one another (the two sexes) since they are bedmates. Where are they carrying discord to? The theory of egoism has correctly impaired the senselessness in egoism as it treads the path of selfishness. Who wants to be selfish? Why do we have to be selfish? Why can't we share what we have with one another in order to better the world?

Even that Rahim and Bonoma (1979); Alper, Tjosvold, and Law (2000); Khun and Poole (2000); Bodtker and Jameson (2001); DeChurch and Marks (2001) have discussed unavailability of discord and that indeed, discord can be good, still they should be used to improve group outcomes. Nego-feminism offers to the world how to manage the two sexes harmoniously.

Expectedly, man in this observation respects his bedmate by seizing to immediately exploit her, just like the woman too stops short of revenge game either when offended by her man. This objective is populated by Nigeria's Obioma Nnaemeka, which she named 'nego-feminism'. But Nnaemeka may have picked the pieces from Freedman who is also grateful to Felman for her view on feminism. To Felman, the objective of harmonious existence is a 'real otherness' which opposes masculinity while also subverting the antics of femininity' (Felman cited in Freedman, 98). However, it is important that both Freedman and Felman failed to name the practice; the coinage, therefore, is Nnaemeka's.

The namelessness was still carried to Gallop's view who equally recognises the need need to tone down the rhetorics of feminism. To her the answer to the problem of the sexes can be solved by dealing squarely with the differences without a recourse opposition; this is pure feminism, she submits (Gallop, 93). Again, this brand of feminism was not named.

Also on this new feminism, Jones opposes overheating any polity on sex. She calls for a note of the fact that 'theories of feminity remain fixated within metaphysical and psychoanalytic frameworks they attempt to dislodge' (Jones, 106); it only invites sex discord.

'Nego-Feminism' in 1999 was named by Nnaemeka. It is important to note this African feminism flowing simply from the word 'negotiation', i.e. 'n-ego'. It means this brand of feminism is a 'non ego' or 'no ego' one. Theories of egoism have pointed to lack of harmony which is badly needed across the globe. Nego-feminism is after negotiation; free from egoistic tendencies which neither the male nor the female holds. It is complementarity of sexes (Nnaemeka, 1999:360; Alkali, 2010:7). The staple point of this spirited effort is its affinity with issues of soft-peddling in the game of antagonism from both sides so as to recognise a more rewarding equal partnering. Nego-feminism surrounds issues of peace or conflict management, negotiation,

complementarity, give-and-take, collaboration, bargaining, mediation, and arbitration. Already, some novels are beginning to tow this line of argument.

Women in these novels do not discuss their men in contempt despite their shortcomings. This is to give room to discussion of issues, not people, since only idle minds discuss people.

A fundamental characteristic of these texts is their distance from tragedy and violence. The female characters do not suffer physical and psychological violence at the hands of men. At least, a partial improvement in the situation of women is acceptable. In contradistinction, the radical texts are distinguished by a disturbing lack of perspectives. Thus, for example, death and murder carry the end of most of radical texts. Radicalist approach is often tied to the fact that their female characters are also oppressed on the basis of, for example, their socio-economic status and/or racial identity. Thus, the gender question is often combined with an examination of other mechanisms of oppression. Men, however, are not even depicted as allies in the struggle against these forms of oppression. These texts display a devastating pessimism, fundamentally denying any hope of a transformation of prevailing gender relations. Not even the reproduction of patriarchal structures through women's behaviour is described as surmountable. At the most, sisterhood or solidarity among women is shown only as a possible source of solace or a vague anchor of hope.

Water Lily is a pioneer third generation women literature in Nigeria. Osammor's novel is recorded in the story of mutual co-existence of the sexes. Her novel is, then, representative of nego-feminist literature. It exercises a partial criticism of patriarchal gender relations, primarily gender inequality in all aspects, and also describes these circumstances as reformable, transformable. Accordingly, *Water Lily* also assumes men's willingness to (partially) rethink.

Nego-feminism is at its best when narrating the complicated train of trial and tribulation on Nkem's assumed barrenness. In its positive applicability to the world, it claims that a woman is worked to the bones, and yet she is thoroughly convinced to disallow herself from taking erroneous, extremist position in remedying the damage done to her; the author is with a particular view to teaching the world to learn from Nkem's experiences. The world is invited to respect 'respect for mutuality between the sexes'. In what appears to be surrendering to the pressures from the outside world on her peace at home, Nkem knew that it was just a question of time before the pressures started having their negative effect on their relationship; she is calculative. Few women with deep sense of feminism today will accept to vacate their home for fellow women. For the first time, perhaps, Osammor, through Nkem, has helped the world to see how possible it is to be accommodative through

how possible it is for a woman to love a man totally; just for himself and not for the fact that he was the father of her offsprings or the provider of her personal comforts (*Water Lily*, p.86).

By implication, it is possible to tolerate ourselves in a/an (inter)national outing! And James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* can be appropriated here to mean Nego-feminism which needs to be upstaged, since it is not peculiar to Africa only. In her deliberate bold claim, Osammor gracefully relieves the spokesperson's narrative authority, in favour of the author for the new female voice,

These things happen all the time, not only in Africa but also in other supposedly civilised societies.

Marriages get arranged and annulled by families for political and socio-economic reasons and not only for love. Concubines are also arranged to produce heirs if the woman taken in wedlock is unable to beget any (*Water Lily*, p.11).

This bold claim is the new position, new voice, the fire this time in the 21st century literature. Peculiarly, the arranged marriage is not coming from the family but the first wife, herself! She has decided to become the woman outside, like Janice D. Yoder and Patricia Aniakudo's article, "Outsider within" the Firehouse: Subordination and Difference in the Social Interactions of African American Women Firefighters, *Gender and Society*, vol. 3, June 1997, pp.324-41. Nkem's resolve to move out of her legitimate house is the very underlying factor for anti-masculinity and anti-femininity. In this new feminism, while male chauvinism vanishes, it is not replaced by a role reversal, or replaced by feminist ego. It is the coming together of men and women for harmonious survival where there is no victor nor vanquished. Thus, despite the peace that turns to pieces as the woman of the house, the failed(?) woman (because she failed to provide her husband with a baby), Nkem still surprisingly decides to hang on to her husband, Odili, and does this in a queer way. Nkem, the supposed counsellor because she is psychologically troubled and is now separated with her wicked step-mother turns to counsel the counsellor, Efu. She is worth quoting discussing the issue with her best friend, Efu,

Don't look so crest fallen, Efu. It is not like you think. I now stay at Apapa but Odili is still very much part of my life. He is welcome to come and see me whenever he pleases; as a matter of fact, the house where I'm staying belongs to him. He insisted that I moved into his property (*Water Lily*, pp.9-10).

And this peculiar "mentor-mentee" system sounds "crazier and crazier by the minute" (p,10) to Efu, the supposed counsellor. In a quite arresting conclusion, Nkem submits that,

I had to move out of Odili's house, so as to preserve and keep as strong as I could, the love that we

share. I know it sounds paradoxical or ironic, that I have to keep away from the person, so as to be able to continue loving him the way I do love Odili; but you see, the circumstances in which we've found ourselves are unusual and so we've had to devise ingenious steps to remedy the situation (*Water Lily*, p,17).

How many feminists can do this?

Another nego-feminist characteristic in this text is also manifest in the liberal portrayal of men. Odili, who at first refuses to agree with the idea of Nkem moving out to another house because it is preposterous, after a while began to appreciate why Nkem did it at all. She moved out to shield their marriage from what she saw coming. To live under the same roof with a woman that one cannot prevent the malice of one's husband's stepmother, etc. is to push the woman forcefully into total disgrace and untold psychological turmoil. The relationship would then be seriously threatened. This liberal portrayal goes along to recommend that the male should come as low as to accept his woman's proposition. This is why Odili insisted that Nkem should relocate to one of his three properties instead. This liberal portrayal goes along with the fact that gender relationships in family life are not questioned. For example, pains are taken to emphasise that at no time does the woman, in this case, Nkem, neglect her duties as wife, "I sincerely love him Effua" she said in a pensive voice (p.17). "He means so much to me", she added, so that in spite of the seeming injustice of accommodating a second wife, she succumbs to the need for the second wife. Her husband does not need to curb himself in his desire for a baby, nor does he have to assume impotency as well because he loves his wife. In contrast, a man with a wife is not expected to show lack of concern/need for children on the one hand, and lack of consideration for his wife on the other. The husband, for example, spends his life between the two demands; the demands of his stepmother and that of his loving wife, while his wife is busy trying to protect her marriage that is built on sound love; his attitude is not criticised. Rather, the situation is rewarded,

I have also decided to embrace the idea of becoming Odili's 'Mistress' and believe me, I am beginning to enjoy it – what with the independence and peace of mind that go with it (*Water Lily*, p,17).

Thus, the myth that men are the head of the family and that women must forego their own wishes in the interests of their husbands is only to a certain extent revitalised here. Osammor is not interested in a redefinition of existing conceptions of (wo)manhood and an overcoming of traditional roles of men and women. What is demanded are new options and scope for women within existing social frameworks. A good illustration of this approach is the novel's position, where nego-feminist demand is claimed. Here measures are demanded that will make it easier for women to take control of their lives, without, however, calling the principle of existing gender relations into question. Thus, for example, recourse to God to take control is urged. Nkem has by this singular drama become a strong believer in the Lord, she has become a church goer and choir member (*Water Lily*, p.19).

Ultimately, Stella Osammor is concerned not with a fundamental transformation of gender relations, but with a partial alleviation of women's burdens, a partial improvement which is also a serious contribution to lifting the fog on womanhood; a partial improvement of the situation of women since no one method may efface all crises. Women should observe their traditional responsibilities, but should also be given new rights and possibilities.

The main focus of *Water Lily* is on polygyny. The story, which splash as a result of men's decision to take second wives, shows not only men, but women too, are culpable for the gender relationships discriminating against women. The author shows that women make life hard for fellow women, and how they do this. Thus, for example, older women use the power offered to them by social hierarchies to satisfy their interests unconditionally, not caring that they are destroying the lives of their daughters, daughters-in-law, and other young women in the process.

But alongside this woman-on-woman discrimination, women's part in their own oppression is addressed positively. Even in the radical feminist, Mariam Ba's *So Long a Letter*, for example, she hints at the possibility of Nego-feminism where Ramatoulaye finishes her letter saying,

I warn you already, I have not given up wanting to refashion my life The word 'happiness' does indeed have meaning, doesn't it? I shall go out in search of it. Too bad for me if once again I have to write you so long a letter..." (Ba,89).

Impliedly in the process of writing her letter and reflecting upon her life, Ramatoulaye starts to rethink and to change. She has already become dynamic in her thinking and behaviour. This dramatises the possibility that women's reproduction of traditional gender relations - their participation in their own 'victimisation' as well as the 'woman-on-woman' discrimination - can be overcome. But it is incumbent upon women to take the initiative such as Osammor is doing. Other novelists need to emulate her.

By taking up the idea of complementarity, closely interrelating it to love, Osammor does not only have the family context in mind, but hints at the wider implications of the way in which a married couple organises their life. Every nation of the world is made up of all the families. The success of a nation therefore depends

inevitably on the family. Just as true love, and therefore, Nego-feminism promises complementarity, and this in turn is a guarantee for harmony in partnerships, happy families are the recipe for a harmonious society. But transformation may require a rigorous break with the old system - a change of generations. This is the chief reason for a break between second and third generation of writers in Nigeria that this study is exploiting.

The chosen novel, therefore, starts and ends with a reversal that fundamentally rewrites the script of feminist pessimism. To appreciate how much this is a statement of faith and a refusal of despair, we have to keep step with Effua as she traverses Nigeria's postfeminist literary discourse in its entirety.

It would be wrong of Magaga Alot to conclude, therefore, that followers of Martin Luther King who put their faith in the "power of love" to win hearts are simply "lunatic" (Alot,69). He would make sense if he had included the fact of a possibility of winning substantial hearts as no one would lose foresight not to acknowledge the fact of exceptions in all general laws. Those who then live by the margins would be inconsequential. This simply is what Nego-feminism harbours its faith on. It has capacity to radiate love and in consequence, win significant hearts. The world cannot continue to be stupid in its injustice to womanhood. Someday, which is here in fact, would live to see a change in the order of the world. But it is important to ask, what are the greater strategies in employing nego-feminist motifs in this generation? These can only be tractable in Logical Framework Indicators and Assumptions of Nego-feminism in the concluding section below.

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