

G. D. NYAMNDI'S ART AND EQUALITY IN MONO AND DUAL SEX SYSTEMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to determine the extent to which G. D. Nyamdi's art reaffirms unabused gender roles which were inherent in pre-colonial African societies. Nyamdi's literary works present a positive gendered relation society in general which is unlike that presented by most early African writers. Nzegwu's theoretical standpoints with regard to equality as viewed in the dual-sex system, where there was complementarity between the sexes unlike the mono-sex system that promotes hierarchical gender relations informs the analysis. The paper hinges on the fact that African literary writings have evolved from a phase where women were almost totally marginalised to one which has a more positive outlook on women and their capabilities. This evolution is actually an acknowledgement of pre-colonial gender roles that were not as hierarchical as we have them today.

Keywords: Mono-sex, dual-sex, equality.

INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF NZEGWU'S GENDER PERSPECTIVE

The evolution of African literature shows that women have always been subjugated or presented basically as inferior to men. In African literature, the supposed subjugation of women is seen in the presentation of women in early African literary texts like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi wa Thiongo's *The River Between* and Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*. This is mainly due to the influence of Western philosophy of patriarchy on African writers. In the Modern societies of the West, women in most cases have always been marginalised. Writing about the modern American society, Mim Kelber, in "Declaration of American Women, 1977" for instance avers that "...American Women...throughout our nation's life have been denied opportunities, rights, privileges, and responsibilities accorded to men" (Issues in Feminism 534). Unlike in the West, women played central roles in African communities but colonialism, with its strong patriarchal leanings, established an educational order that privileged men and women became objects. Therefore, the view that all women have always been marginalized may not be true. In theorizing this way, Nzegwu in "Impact and Limits of the Metaphysics of Gender" notes that the false universalisation and homogenization of women's experiences "obscures contextual specificities and social complexities of a vast array of non-western traditions" (Wiredu 561). Talking about the Nigerian experience, for instance, Lorand J. Matory posits that "...the term 'gender' [does not] require the premise of universal male dominance or even universal sexual asymmetry" ("Is There Gender in Yoruba Culture?" 518). In line with Matory's view, Ifi Amadiume in *Male Daughters Female Husbands* submits that in "traditional society, a flexible gender system [existed where] male roles were open to certain categories of women through such practices as "*nhanye*," male daughters, and "*igba ohu*," female husbands. These institutions placed women in a more favourable position for the acquisition of wealth and formal political power and authority" (123). She adds that a

strong male domination and ideology did exist in the formal Nnobi traditional social and ideological structure, but at the same time the flexibility of its gender system mitigated gender dualism. This was not the case with the

Victorian ideology transported into the Igboland by the British missionaries and educationalists. It was from their ideologies that the expression ‘a woman’s place is in the home’ was derived. (136)

The African woman’s place had never been in only in the home. Colonialism, thus, empowered African men to be patriarchal and early African writers who were for the most part males promoted this feature in their writings. For instance, the aspect of the man being the “master” and the woman a “servant” was imported from the West. When colonialism was introduced, the male colonizer was always at the forefront while the woman humbly followed him behind, playing no active role in whatever important mission he was accomplishing. So, they behaved as demi-gods towards their wives and it is this feature that the Africans started imitating with the coming of the whiteman. In pidgin English for instance, a woman refers her husband as “my masa” which is literally translated is “my master.” This concept which had not been evident in the African communities only came into existence with the coming of the whiteman and was imitated, no doubt, the literature presented male characters in the limelight and women at the “background.”

The introduction of patriarchy, that is, the one that denies complementarity between the sexes, in Africa was followed by feminism which also started in the West and sought to assert women’s rights in a male-dominated world. Nkiru Umechia Nzegwu in *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* posits that feminist literature in Africa since the 1980s has consistently and progressively underscored the subjugation and oppressed state of African women, with the implication that African women have very limited rights within families and their societies. In Nzegwu’s opinion, such presumptions lead to the conclusion that the women are “nonpersons” (158) which is a faulty assumption as far as pre-colonial Africa is concerned. She posits that although feminism has made important contributions towards redefining these gender relations, its individualistic notion of equality in which sex difference is viewed as inconsequential is problematic. Its emphasis on individualism allows gender inequity to be preserved and reinforced. Presented as “emancipatory,” the individualistic conception of equality as equivalence is a non-liberatory concept.

Nzegwu examines the conception of equality between the sexes in the mono and dual-sex systems. The monosex system as viewed by Nzegwu is one that privileges one gender while in dual sex systems, both genders positively relate for the wellbeing of the entire community. Nzegwu emphasises that true equality can only be attained when a society is “ungendered” and this can only be through the dual-sex system which “challenges the idea that sexual division of labour implies women’s subjugation or patriarchy as instead, it provides a robust conception of equality that rests on duty and responsibility” (20). On the contrary, she rejects the mono-sex system which is essentially western-derived as it “provides a conception of equality that does not combat sexist oppression because it embodies an individualistic conception of equality that does not provide much emancipatory potential for the individual” (20). Nzegwu, thus, brings out two ways of understanding equality: the western feminist model which entails sameness between men and women so that they both have the same things and the Onitsha (African) women’s model which acknowledges the biological differences between women and men and structures their relationship to be equal. The Western model of equality entails using men as the yardstick for equality without considering women’s interests while the African model forms the basis of equal worth between men and women because focus is both on men and women’s interests and aspirations. Nzegwu emphasises that seeking equality is not equal to wanting to be a man. So her ideas such as the

playing of complementary roles between the sexes, focus on individual versus communal rights in the fight for equality, female bonding and networking as well as issues that impede on feminist writings will be discussed in this paper.

This paper sets out to determine the extent to which Nyamdi's art reaffirms unabused gender roles which were inherent in pre-colonial African societies using *The Will* and *The Imprisonment of Sende Ghandi*, where women and men both play leading roles, each in his/her capacity, all for their self developments and that of their communities. These texts are therefore, chosen as working paradigm because they present a more positive picture of relationship between men and women than most early African writers who presented men in leading roles and a woman as the subordinate of the man

Reading Nyamndi through Nzegwu

According to Nzegwu, complementarity between the sexes is of prime importance as far as equality is concerned. Laura Ghandi and Sende Ghandi in *The Imprisonment of Sende Ghandi* are epitomes of the idea of complementarity. When the farmers' hard earned money is embezzled, the Ghandi's demonstrate a lot of goodwill and see to it that they get back their money. Thus, when Laura helps the farmers to retrieve their money, the farmers make her their accountant and Sende Ghandi the Manager of the Farmer's Trust since he conceived the idea of the creation of the bank. These people are chosen based on their efficiency. Laura is comfortable in her position and will serve the farmers as well as Ghandi in different capacities. Laura is neither fighting to take Ghandi's place nor is Ghandi vying for Laura's position. They are all working towards the growth of the community.

Laura's role falls in line with Nzegwu's in her Docu-drama, *The Conclave*, where Omu Nwagboka posits that even though the Onitsha women have their own problems with their men, they do not share the view that women have always been the 'other' (162). Hence, men and women in this context play complementary roles in the running of the society, as women's opinions are taken into consideration. To Omu Nwagboka and her team, the Igbo interlocutors in Nzegwu's *The Conclave*, Western feminists have taken men as the defining yardstick for equality and seem to want to be men, whereas gender difference is not supposed to be a disadvantage for women. Hence, being a woman does not mean being subordinate to the man or being oppressed. Onyeamama posits that, unlike what obtains in the West, "...we are not yearning to be men. We have a voice, and we are social complements of men in an interdependent complex" (186). They live by the principle of the following Igbo proverbs: "[t]he right hand shakes the left and the left hand shakes the right... Let the hawk perch; let the eagle perch; whoever asserts that the other cannot perch, let its wing dislocate" (190-191).

The Onitsha women's stand is that women are not men and the difference does not signal oppression because they play interdependent roles for the smooth social, political and economic running of their society. In line with this idea, Laura Ghandi, commenting about the way she has tricked her exploitative boss to retrieve the farmers' hard-earned money says "...in addition to being a woman, I also have a head" (*Tussles* 166) and the farmers respond "We can see it. And a beautiful one too" (*Tussles* 166). The metaphorical representation of the mind in this quotation indicates that the society in this play positively considers the intellectual capacity in all human beings unlike in early African literature where a woman, no matter how intellectually strong she was could not come to the limelight. Nzegwu therefore is of the opinion that women's search for 'equality' with men is elusive. Women ought to make

their actions and decisions felt in their societies as women and not as men. She therefore criticises some African feminist writers as she posits:

Writers such as Ogun-dipe-Leslie, Afonja, Pearce and Amadiume have characterized indigenous cultures as patriarchal and portrayed their indigenous dual- symmetrical structures as oppressive to women. They privilege the social relation of the mono-sex system because they fail to see its male-privileging aspects. (“Gender Equality in a Dual-Sex System: The Case of Onitsha”)

Nzegwu also emphasises equality that is geared towards societal or communal goals rather than the individualistic emancipation or the Western liberal equality model that is evident in mono-sex systems. As concerns marriage for instance, Nzegwu says woman-woman marriages were encouraged for various reasons. One of such reasons was the inability of a woman to give birth. If a woman found herself in this condition, she could, as a matter of responsibility, ensure that there was continuity by marrying a wife who will bear children for her, for the dual-sex system rests on “...duty and responsibility” (20). It is important to note here that these marriages were not lesbianic in any way but had to do with one of the parties giving birth and both of them being responsible for the child’s upkeep and upbringing, thus, having the responsibility over the child. This idea of duty and responsibility in equality as stipulated by Nzegwu comes alive in some of the texts under study. For instance, in *The Imprisonment of Sende Ghandi*, Laura Ghandi presents herself as a very responsible character. She gets herself involved in the Farmers’ case not because she is a farmer but just because she thinks it is unjust for Mr. Sunday to squander the money which the farmers have worked so hard to obtain. She explains to the farmers that when Mr. Sunday asked her to transfer the money to his Swiss account, she had thought it wise not to.

...I said to myself: this is the farmers’ sweat and no jot of it will disappear, much less cross the ocean to I do not know which safe haven for rogues. And so I used the money to create a new home for your money called the Farmers’ Trust. That’s the new bank where all your money is kept. (Tussles 166)

It is evident that Laura is not only interested in her rights and those of women but the rights of the whole community, a value of the dual-sex system in pre-colonial Africa. She takes the responsibility of promoting justice in the community.

Female bonding, which is a kind of modern day female networking is one of the aspects that the dual-sex system encourages. Nzegwu makes mention of Omu (the female monarch) of the community and Onye-Isi-Ikporo-Onitsha (Head of Ikporo Onitsha) which are major political institutions with extensive political obligations. The Onitsha interlocutors in “The Conclave” say the Omu is a:

Pan-community group that negotiates political issues on the basis of our political category. As a political group, we are indomitable. Our strength is magnified and is much more than the number of people in the group. So when we speak of “having a voice,” we mean having the right to participate in both political governance and political administration. (185).

Their decisions are taken into consideration based on the fact that they are a group. It may be difficult for one person to do or think what a group of people can. In *The Imprisonment of Sende Ghandi*, for instance, Ene-gembole’s complaint has more weight when Laura joins her in attacking Mr. Sunday. For example, when Ene-gembole tells the Manager “Mr Bank Manager, I am a farmer as you can see, and the Delegate of all farmers. I am here to see into the running of our Scheme” (Tussles 161), Ene-gembole adds, “...my sister! Come and help me!” (Tussles 161). She continues to exclaim, “My sister!” to show the extent to which their

thoughts are similar. It is because Laura helps Enegembole that she is able to succeed as the farmers' delegate. The concept of female bonding as a very useful revolutionary tool is reminiscent of that in most of Bole Butake's plays. For instance, in *Lake God* the women collectively decide to starve their husbands (with sex and food) till they bring pressure to bear on the Fon who does nothing to stop the cattle from destroying their crops. Shadrach A. Ambanasom in *Education of the Deprived* compares them with the Athenian women of Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata* who succeed by using this same strategy (55). Similarly, Nzegwu revisits two major historical events in which Onitsha women, in order to seek solutions to their plight, withdraw from their social roles as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters, leading to emotional, sexual, administrative, counseling, feeding, commercial and spiritual disruption of the Igbo society. The action leads to the Obi's (male monarch) immediate response to the women's demands. Nzegwu revisits these events to show the "...interdependent nature of social relations and family obligations" (*Family Matters* 159). It is thus evident that female bonding has very positive results in the development of writings that advance the cause women and promote positive gender relations. Female bonding ties with Nzegwu's objectives to "...recover women's social histories and to present a viable social model for combating the continuing subordination of women" (161).

Mono-Sex Systems

The presentation of some characters and events in some of the texts under study, however diverge from Nzegwu's ideal as it obtained in pre-colonial Africa. At the beginning of *The Will*, the woman is still presented from a marginalized perspective. As seen in the forgone discussion, Nzegwu believes that women like men have their roles to play in society and there should be naturally no room for marginalization of any gender. The women still consider themselves inferior and their life is determined by what the men say or do to them. They have no minds or voices of their own. This accounts for why Libong's wife, daughter and sisters all depend so much on the wealth which Libong leaves behind at his demise. Laurretta for instance depends so much on her husband that she feels so frustrated at his death. Her daughter gets the following response as she tries to console her:

My daughter, you cannot understand. Someday may be you will understand. The day a man takes total control of your life, you will understand. The day a man eats and you are full, you will understand. You will understand the day a man drinks and you get drunk. (19)

Laurretta been culturally constrained to place the man at the centre of her life. So from the above quotation, it is evident that the image of Laurretta at the beginning of the play is not a positive one towards women's emancipation. She however evolves from the non-assertive woman to an assertive one as she accepts to work hard to sustain herself. There is therefore a radical evolution in Laurretta and her daughter's life. Like Laurretta at the beginning of *The Will*, Bertha in Nyamndi's *Babi Yar Symphony* has no emancipatory potentials as she relies on her husband to the extent that when he is arrested, she has to commit adultery to sustain herself instead of looking out for a more positive way of coping with the situation. The narrator submits:

Since her husband's arrest, money had stopped coming in, but the problems had not dried up in the same order; they stormed in instead, as if chased from the streets by a whirlwind. Admiring other women in their fashion had now become favourite past time. (83)

What is worse is that Bertha commits adultery with Swaibu, her husband's (Nunchem's) enemy who locks him up for no justified reason. She does not fight in any way for the release of her husband. She is unlike Laura Ghandi in *The Imprisonment*... who fights very hard for

the release of her husband who is unjustly locked up in the police cell. Bertha is a confused, dormant and materialistic woman who will always wait for a man to satisfy her needs. The way men are presented in this literature is therefore of great importance, if one is to consider the extent of the strength or determination of these assertive female characters in the fight for equality.

Most societies in most contemporary African literary texts are still patriarchal. They are typical of societies represented in mono-sex systems. The men consider themselves or are considered as the yardstick for measurement. For instance, in John Nkemngong Nkengasong's *Across the Mongolo*, the woman remains at the periphery. Ngwe's father makes sure that he grows up to be a "man" and not a "woman" as if being a woman is a crime. This type of situation where subjugation of one gender is rampant is unlike the pre-colonial African society which Nzegwu presents in her text. Omu Nwagboka's team in "The Conclave" asserts that there are biological differences between men and women but that the biological differences are not rooted in power or ideological ranking, so that biological difference does not pre-suppose either women's or men's subjugation. Therefore, gender difference in Igbo culture did not equal gender inequality as in the West. Onyeamama in *The Conclave* posits that unlike what obtains in the West, "we are not yearning to be men. We have a voice, and we are social complements of men in an interdependent context" (186). But in Today's African society, a different situation from the one described by Onyeamama obtains as represented in literature, for instance, *The Will*, male chauvinism seems to be the norm. Mendi is an epicurean son who despite his exposure (studying abroad) remains steadfast to his patriarchal leanings. It is because he knows that he is the lone man in the family that he squanders the late father's wealth. He avers "I am the man in this family" (27). Therefore, he assumes that his father's property must have been willed to him. He questions: 'What right-thinking man will at his death abandon his fortunes to the vagaries of a woman? That sex is enough trouble already as it is. My father cannot, repeat cannot have committed such an outrage against commonsense' (28). To Mendi therefore, women should not have a right to inheritance. Nyamndi satirises this patriarchal setting through the presentation of a shameful and repentant Mendi at the final thought of his actions. When he discovers that he was not supposed to do with his father's wealth whatever he wanted and especially its liquidation, his uneasy and shameful gestures can only portray his regret and with the pronouncement of the spirit, he dies.

The setting in *The Imprisonment* is a liberal one for development as far as women are concerned. This is evident in the elections conducted to vote the farmers' delegate. There is no discrimination against women as voting or enfranchisement is not dependent on sex. Enegembole is voted as the farmers' delegate by both men and women who know she can represent them best. However, despite the patriarchal society in which most of the other female characters find themselves and the fact that some live in conformity with the chauvinistic values, some still challenge these dominant structures. The women are ready to assert themselves despite all odds. Some of these women include Laura Ghandi and Laurretta and Anta at the end of *The Will*.

Laura Ghandi is a strong character. She is able to help the farmers and also to release her husband from custody without any complex of being a woman or a man. Laura, therefore, presents a very positive picture of what an emancipated woman should be, as she is not only concerned with her assertiveness but equally communal rights. Her actions tally with Nzegwu's concept of equality in a dual-sex system which she says is not socially disconnecting concept. Laurretta and Anta are weaker characters in comparison with Laura for

it is only at the end when Libong's wealth has been squandered that they decide to take their life into their hands. The fact that it is Anta (of the new generation) who encourages her mother to consider being independent indicates a very positive development in literature affirming positive gender relations as existed in pre-colonial Africa.

CONCLUSION

Nzegwu's form of equality as viewed in the dual-sex unlike the mono-sex system is evident in Nyamndi's art which can confirm that African literary writings have evolved from a phase where women were almost totally marginalised to one which has a more positive outlook on male/female relationships. Women are no longer presented as solely performing "inferior" duties or found in marginal roles. Some are able to influence decision-making and actively take part in the smooth running of the society. Men have come to reaffirm the importance of women in the society and also the fact that society will cease to function properly if women cease to "exist." Adeola James for instance, suggests that the real reason for the tragic disruption of society depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is because "...the female principle is neglected whilst the male principle, with its strong-headedness and inflexibility, is promoted above all else" (Par 2). Thus, while the dual-sex structure accords greater respect to women, thereby fostering, peace, equality and development, the monosex system that promotes the marginalisation of women can cause societal destabilisation. Characters such as Laura Ghandi, Enegembole in *The Imprisonment of Sende Ghandi* and Anta and Loretta at the end of *The Will* are neither passive nor submissive. Laura Ghandi and Enegembole, for instance are engaged in imaginative strategies to fight their cause and that of the oppressed farmers, an indication that the "female principle" must also be encouraged for the smooth functioning of society.

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