

Feminism and the African Male Writer: The Poetry of Dami Ajayi

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Abstract: *Feminism, like other "isms," has generated controversies since its inception. Amongst the issues surrounding this movement is its place in a largely patriarchal continent like Africa. African Literature of the middle part of the Twentieth Century demonstrated the inequality between the male and female genders. The prominent place given to a man in various African societies and the eerie "insignificant" roles assigned to women ironically buttress the burden placed on the shoulders of women. Aided by the strides made by Feminism, the twenty-first-century African writers have shifted the way they portray female characters. In this instance, the aesthetics that trail the female body is viewed through the lens of a male writer. Using the tenets of Feminist Literary Theory which include resistance of the manacles of patriarchy and embracement of femininity, the poems of Dami Ajayi demonstrate that the power of the female body lies with one who possesses the body and not a system put in place to control and laud over the feminine body and agency. As such, his poems show the stance of feminism and the beauty of the female body unburdened by Patriarchy.*

Key Words: *Feminism; Femininity; Inequality; Patriarchy; African Literature.*

INTRODUCTION

Writers have always been assertive in their writings. This assertiveness is reflected in the language that lays the foundation and the root of their projects. Writers in the twenty-first century who are indigenous to Africa continue to re-examine and question issues that are considered controversial. One such issue is the representation of women in fiction and reality. As is the case of this study, Dami Ajayi, through the voice of the personas in his poems, demonstrates the resistance of females to patriarchal laws and customs, subjugation, and gender inequality. The current generation of African writers is more concerned with tackling issues and problems in their locale and focusing more on the multitudinous issues destabilizing their nations. Nigerian writers have also shown the plight of women in their society through their writings to challenge and change the societal and cultural norms mapped out by patriarchy. The change in the portrayal of females and female characters has also triggered a shift in the way female characters are previously portrayed and shows new dimensions for discourse in Literature. Issues like gender inequality and domestic violence (physical, sexual, and emotional abuse) are depicted in detail with the idea of shedding more light on them. Molemodile and Mba (2010, p.137) note that the "emergence of male feminist writers is in line with gender struggle, structural modes of modernization and

enforcement of renegotiation of respective political and intellectual agenda and recognition for women."

Dispassionate men realize the necessity of empowering women and exercising free exploration of feminine potential in contributing to societal development (Molemodine and Mba, 2010). Other writers like Chika Unigwe, Chimamanda Adichie, Sefi Attah, Yewande Omotoso have also portrayed female characters whose voices and lips do not shake and quiver. It is Nwagbara's opinion that "these new writers have reconfigured womanhood, prioritizing female individualism and empowerment, thereby subverting the seeming powerlessness of women to political authority" (Nwagbara, 2009, p.65). By exposition, they have upturned women's revolt of the public scope through literary creation that engages with the new reality of literature and literary studies. Beauvoir (1947) opines that "the body of a woman is sometimes seen as a hindrance, a prison weighed down by everything, and one must not lose sight of the fact that before the inception of feminism, being human is defined by the male" (Beauvoir, 1947, p. 57). She further states that:

Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. Most women think of men as the center of their world therefore a man can think of himself without a woman. She cannot think of herself without a man, and she is simply what a man defines'. The female body is perceived as that which has some defects. The dominance of the man over the woman is as a direct result of the society that exists, the patriarchal society. This dominance is, however, not the same everywhere as society is dynamic (Beauvoir, 1947, p. 57).

From the above quotation, Beauvoir opines that a woman must break the bondage of patriarchy and define and establish herself. This breaking free from the manacles of patriarchy enables her to refuse the label and emblem placed on her by her society. By breaking from the shackles of patriarchy, she defies male classification as the "other". It is important that women break away from the shackles of patriarchy as this will enable them to find their voices. Abiding by the rules of patriarchy leads to stagnancy in the overall growth and development of the female populace.

FEMINISM AND THE AFRICAN WRITER

Some writers have noted that older generation of African male writers created female characters that were weak and with trembling voices. These weak female characters, reiterate Osofisan's (2004) belief that "the bulk of our literature is secretly a weapon of male propaganda, of an agenda to keep the female under perpetual dominance" (Osofisan, 2004, p. 4). It is also the opinion of Nnoli (2009) that "the image of women in African literature is a gloomy one, compounded by the unhelpful hand of tradition and patriarchy". He continues by noting that 'from the Edenic myth to modern times, women have been depicted as angels with feet of clay, as purveyors of unhappiness' (Nnoli, 2009, p. 165). In a country like Nigeria where the default cultural setting is patriarchal, women in most households are expected to possess the garb of humility, be submissive and largely be seen not heard. The crux of a woman's being is an object

for childbearing and nurturing. Any move to deviate from these normalized, assigned roles is seen as a move to upset the balance of nature.

A patriarchal society expects females to be sex objects and bend to the demands of men in a patriarchal system. For Onyemaechi Udumukwu (2007), "the conditions are created by patriarchal structures so that a man is privileged to openly express his sexuality, while a woman's sexuality is policed and suppressed. This provokes an oppositional relationship, male hegemony, on the one hand, and female submission, on the other hand". Men become the superior subjects while women become the objectified. Due to this imbalance in the societal expectations of men and women, tensions emerge given how unequal and harmful the relationship is (Udumukwu 2007, p. 152). Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) in 'The Female Writer and Her Commitment' posits that "a woman writer has two major responsibilities; first, to talk about being a woman; secondly, to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective (Ogundipe-Leslie 1993, p. 107). Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Newell (2006) agrees with Ogundipe-Leslie and notes that "African men control the discussion of gender, and male ridicule, aggression and backlash have resulted in making women apologetic and have given the term feminist a bad name." She further writes that "writers must attempt to break free from the limited range of female stereotypes circulating in African popular and literary culture and reinstate the story of being a woman in the real complex sense of the term" (Newell, 2006, p. 145). Below is the opinion of Martha, a character in Dangaremba's (2009) *She No Longer Weeps*:

To be a woman is no longer a crime punishable by a lifetime of servitude to a man. I know that in your day there were many pressures that prevented a woman from becoming independent. I know there were not even women who could be independent because they couldn't work for a wage or salary, but people saw to it that women would remain dependent because that was the only way of thinking that people knew then. . . . I don't have to be tied by those beliefs because I can support myself and I will not sacrifice myself to a man's eye just because society says I ought to. I'm as much a part of society as any one of you where I see that change needed; nothing will deter me from making that change in my own life or from working towards achieving that change (Dangaremba, 2009, p.120).

What we see from the passage is the reclamation of one's voice and freedom. Marta is determined to be recognized as a human, with equal rights and privileges as a man. She acknowledges the privileges that favors men in her society but that tries to note that that the inequality meted out to women belong somewhat in the past. The only way to distinguish herself from the women that come before her is by her determination to not sacrifice herself and desires to patriarchy.

The words, gender and feminism are controversial when discussed in certain settings. Kolawole (2002) asserts that "many assume gender to be synonymous with women's matters in general and feminism in particular. Consequently, many Black African men consider gender a divisive concept imported from the West to 'enslave'

African women and alienate them from African men and the general struggle against racism" (Kolawole, 2022, p. 35). He continues by noting that many African women initially rejected feminism, perceiving it as a Western ideology imported to Africa to ruin the family structure. The hostile reception of feminism by some African scholars is linked to the failure of feminism to address the many specific African historical and cultural contexts. Feminism is an ideological praxis that gives us multiple strategies (of reading, analysis). What those strategies have in common is that the woman matters (Kolawole 2022, p. 6).

Lange (2008) notes that "today's male authors are still being held accountable for how past male authors used feminist ideas against women. This is a discouraging idea because if today's feminist critics are not willing to look beyond past mistakes, they are preventing themselves from reading and studying literature that would offer a new understanding of the sexes" (Lange, 2008, p. 23). She further states that "this kind of thinking only reinforces gender roles that can be as damaging to men as they are to women. If men continue to be seen as patriarchal and sexist, then they may never see themselves as anything different, and may resist change, thinking it is futile" (Lang 2008, p. 23). Lange's essay buttresses the need to leave the methodologies applied by African writers in the relics where they belong.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study is hinged on feminist theory. Writings that advocate for the rights and financial, economic, and social equality of women are said to be part of the feminist theory. When discussing the history of feminism and feminist theory, Mary Wollstonecraft is noted as the mother of feminist theory and criticism. Feminism advocates for women to view themselves as valued people, capable of owning the same privileges and human rights as men. Hence, "feminists encourage women to express themselves and assert their own voices in the arenas of policies, communities, society, and education. By obliging to fostering such change, feminists anticipate creating a society in which the female voice is seen at par with the male" (Bressler, 1994, p.196). For this assertion to be effective, many women have taken up roles in different sectors and ministries to drive home their points and be mentors that young feminists can emulate. Feminism is a belief that although women and men are routinely presented as equal, most societies privilege men and relegate women to the background. As a result, social movements are required to realize equality between women and men, with the understanding that gender will always intersect with other social hierarchies. Bressler further notes that a "call for a socio-political movement to address the inequalities suffered by women in men dominated societies will among other things; provide a safe environment for women against any attack from men" (Bressler, 1994, p.54). Ogundipe-Leslie (2007) opines that feminism is "an ideology of woman; anybody with social philosophy about women is a feminist. Therefore, a feminist is not only woman working on issues related to women, but anyone (male/female) can be classified as one" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 2007, p. 104). A feminist can also be defined as one who believes that men and women should be equal politically, economically, and socially. This is Ogundipe-Leslie's view on the type of Feminism that examines issues that concern women:

Stiwa' is my acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa... I have advocated the word 'Stiwanism', instead of feminism, to bypass the combative discourses that ensue whenever one raises the issue of feminism in Africa.... The word feminism' itself seems to be a kind of red tag to the bull of African men. Some say the word by its very nature is hegemonic, or implicitly so. Others find the focus on women in themselves somehow threatening. Some who are genuinely concerned with ameliorating women's lives sometimes feel embarrassed to be described as feminist... (Ogundipe-Leslie, 2007, p.145).

Comparison of the roles and situations of women in the twenty-first century and the centuries before is important, so that the progress made over the years can be gauged. Azodo (1997) opines that "a look at the situation of women in Africa, in the past and in the present, shows that a univocal theory of global feminism does not address the special conditions in which African women find themselves. Rigid traditions discriminate against African women who are seen as perpetual children and second-class citizens" (Azodo, 1997, p. 4). She concludes by noting that 'endemic sexism, patriarchal attitudes, and the force of blinding tradition bond African men in a hegemonic system that nourishes and protects their interests' (Azodo 1997, p. 44). This is the stance of Ama Aidoo (2007) on Feminism:

Millions of women and girls have been, and are being, prevented from realizing their full potential as human beings, whether it be the possibility of being writers and artists, doctors and other professionals, athletes or anything else outside the traditional roles assigned to women. It is definite that anything that had to do with African women of all vital pieces of information, the most unknown (or rather sought), the most ignored of all concerns, the most unseen of all visibles, and one might as well face it, of everything to do with humanity, the most despised. This had nothing to do with the tics of sex and the politics of the wealthy of this earth, who grabbed it and who held it. (Aidoo, 2007, p. 314).

Despite the distinctions in the workings of feminism, the common tenets of feminism are rooted in freedom from the manacles of patriarchy and the pursuit of equality for women. The methodology employed in this study is the textual analytical methodology. Structuring our essay on some of the tools of Feminist criticism, which highlights a writer's intentions, the stance of a writer on female body autonomy, the examination of characters of a text and the language applied by the writer, subsequent paragraphs analyze the poems of Dami Ajayi.

DAMI AJAYI AND THE CELEBRATION OF FEMININITY

Dami Ajayi in his Poetry Collection, *A Woman's Body is a Country* portrays the intricate yet compelling and attractive nature of a woman's body. The collection is filled with poems that celebrate womanhood, womanity, and femininity. "The Alphabet Laboratory" is a template in the act of wooing and is fraught with words that aim to flatter, to be drawn to, and, in a way, not to seduce. The introductory line of the poems suggests a difficulty in the speech of the persona as he struggles to find words

for the description of the woman he is enamored to. He notes that "poetry is the broken word of a stutterer/clip, clip, clip, bang" (Ajayi, 2017, lines 1-2), suggesting that the pause that follows the pronunciation of the words is by one who struggles with words. He further states that:

A lover looks at his beloved
And creams out words.
A new kind of orgasm
All words are stolen from an Alphabet pool
To undergo serial recombinant therapy.
The smartest scribblers are negotiating turns
In the race of verbs, nouns, adjectives,
Adverbs, prepositions are clues for positions.
Another letter drops with a sibilant hiss
Then I found U. (Ajayi, 2017, Lines 11-20)

The 'U' in the last line is more than the twenty-first letter of the English Alphabet. As the persona suggested in the first line of the poem, 'Poetry is the broken word of a stutterer', the shortening of 'You' to 'U' shows stuttering not just as a speech impediment but also as that which also manifests in writing.

In "Ode to an Untimely Obituary", the persona is thrown into misery at the departure of his lover. His diction in this poem conveys the importance of this lover to him and his wellbeing. Since her departure, he has noticed that the "the gate wears her grin on stapled paper/ no fresh laughter to consolidate the memories, no fresh dreams to make sleep desirable/ no stop watches to still things" (Ajayi, 2017, lines 13-16). The last line shows that the persona yearns for the power to change things, to be with his woman, to fill the void that her departure has created. His yearning for his lover is also shown in the lines, "And do you console a man when death snatches his woman from his arm? / no waist beads to say prayers with, no lanugo hair to trap conjugal heat" (Ajayi, 2017, lines 1-3). His enquiry into the meaninglessness of life is captured in the lines:

Life goes on like dying is a bulb
But when you switch it on
The room is empty and gloomy
And her portrait gathers dust.
Life is everything and dust. (Ajayi 2017, lines 17-20).

A lover's anguish at the departure of a soulmate is detailed in "Hooke's Law". This time, a lover makes provisions for reminders of his person while he is gone. This provision makes the parting easier. The persona starts the poem by noting that the people claim that "affection is clay and with my hands/ I shall forge a miniature stool for you to sit on while I am away/so that days will not collapse into hours" (Ajayi 2017, lines 1-4). He acknowledges the efficacy of time where relationships are concerned; for 'time does not obey Hooke's Law' rather "it is a currency that we do not spend wisely" (Ajayi, 2017, lines 8-9). His regret at not utilizing the time he has with his lover is evident in the lines above, considering the flitting nature of time. "I know what

Lagos does to Dreams” is a poem that pays homage to one of the busiest cities in Africa. Its attributes are likened to that of woman. Lagos is busy, “it is audacious without remorse” (Ajayi, 2017, line 6). This line celebrates the temeritous nature of the modern woman who refused to be gagged, who sometimes has to scream to be heard, and who has refused the label given to her by society. She speaks, and she asks for clarification. She asks to be heard even as she is made to feel guilty by speaking up. For what this city does to dreams, “she undresses them like a nubile without blemish/ it wriggles past entropy in motion”. (Ajayi, 2017, lines 1, 5). Just like the city in motion, a woman is always on the move. Any moment spent recounting the past or any form of contemplation on the past, destroys the giant strides made by women to wriggle from the grasp of patriarchy.

Liberation and freedom of femininity are captured in “Twenty-Two Couplets” where the power of copulation lies with the female. This power negates the held notion on some parts of the country where it is believed that coitus is an act where a man stays on top and attempting to change or topple this position is seen as an abomination. When amongst fellow women, women are known to be open about their sexuality, sexual preferences and the challenges that behoove them. As many of them have admitted, staying on top during sex gives them the opportunity to determine the tempo and rhythm of the sexual act. Here, it is not about being in control, but making sure that both the man and the woman get equal satisfaction. He says of the persona:

Let his bride ride him on a bed of scented roses
While soft rains pummel the doughy Oko laterite
Let lightning crack the skies as thunder belches
Let leaves flutter their freedom in windy vehicles
Let soil surrender its richness to the call of restive waters. (Ajayi, 2017, 35-39).

The metaphors that fraught the above poem like the ‘leaves that flutter their freedom’ lend credence to the freedom that the female crave to experience sex and sexuality in their full forms. The liberation of female sexuality is further stated in the following lines in the poem, “Banana”:

She still haunts me
That buxom Bugandan lady
Who promised to shower me with her waters...
She says I am entitled to every pleasure.
I could tell from her smile that her lips don’t lie
Neither would her hips. (Ajayi, 2017, lines 1-6).

The worship of the beauty that is the woman body is also analyzed in “Waist Bead” as the persona analyzes the body of his lover adorned with ornaments that enhance her beauty. He muses about ‘ways beads come off/shift beads towards the swell of her breasts/ inch down her waist, her rubbery thighs/down/ till they hit the floor. I became born-again after a small death with a goddess; it was matchless/ the sweat, the fever and I have never looked back (Ajayi, 2017, lines 2-6).

What we have in 'Begging' is the sincerity of the persona on where his lover is concerned. He writes that his woman is one he yearns to spend the rest of his life with. The beauty of the diction in this poem resonates through its uncomplicated ten-lines. The persona opines that "my knees have not known the ground since the days of the naughty corner. ../but tonight, in front of the house in Ibadan Street/ watched by a stretch of Lagos starry skies, my knees touch the ground/ and I beg you to say yes. Tonight is what we will know ourselves by" (Ajayi, 2017, lines 2-6).

CONCLUSION

Dami Ajayi's poems show the intricate yet compelling beauty of a woman's body. The fact that the praises for the enigma that is a woman and the compelling beauty that is a woman's body is coming from an African male writer makes a huge difference given the backlash women have gotten in the past and the way the female gender is portrayed in literature and literary studies before the twenty-first century. The genre of literature chosen by Ajayi also helps in driving home the point that the representation of women in their true nature will continue to shine a light in twenty-first-century writings as poetry gives room for multiple interpretations due to poetic license. The beauty of womanhood is celebrated not only in the poems analyzed, but also in the strength and resilience of femininity. Viewing this exploration through the pen of a male writer underscores a divergent and refreshing way of interpreting feminist writing in the twenty-first century.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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