WOMEN IN ÔBASÁ’S POETRY

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Abstract

Ôbasá’s creativity cuts across virtually all aspects of Yorùbá socio-cultural settings and his works have attracted the attention of various scholars. It is evident that his poems are laden with topical issues that are of national interest. Most of his works, as described by previous scholars, are based on his love for and interest in Yorùbá language, social values, language, style, cultural practices, and the recovery endangered Yoruba oral art (Babalọlá 1971, 1973; Olábímtán 1974a, 1974b; Ògúnsínà 1980; Òlátúnjí 1982; Akínyemí 1987, 1991, 2017; and Nnodim 2006). This essay focuses on the representation of women in Ôbasá’s poetry, a topic that has not been given adequate attention. The essay attempts a close reading of Ôbasá’s poems within the Feminism and womanism theoretical frameworks. The research reveals that the representation of women in the poetry of Obasa did not go beyond the stereotypical and derogatory portrayal of women among the Yoruba.

Introduction

In Yorùbá traditional setting, the importance of women is of high repute and cannot be overemphasized. Yorùbá women are generally strong, highly intelligent, lively, expressive, determined, and devoted to their family. They are very versatile, loyal, as well as enterprising. This is aptly captured in the Ifá corpus of Èjìogbè that, Bí òdá owó se n dá mi ni Ààbò obinrin mí n bò mí (when I was in financial crisis, Ààbò, my wife bailed me out). This Ifá excerpt corroborates the facts that women provide necessary support for their spouses. The need for a Yoruba man to be married is also encoded in the proverb, àllóbinrin kò seé dáké sí, bá a dáké, ejó ní i kó bání (an unmarried man will have to explain to people around him why he is not married). This shows that women are very important in Yoruba men’s live and the society at large. However, the representation of women in Yoruba literature is nothing to write home about. According to Ogunsina (1997),
What we have is a literature whose concern is wholly for men... To a large extent, images of women in Yorùbá traditional oral and written literary tradition are awkward and inaccurate... Women are known to have played socio-political roles... but these are usually trivialized and misrepresented by literary artists and playwrights, thus distorting our knowledge of women contributions (89).

It is gratifying to note that some contemporary Yorùbá creative writers have shown understanding in creating positive image of women. Among such writers are Àrinpé Adéjùmọ, Olúyémisí Adébọwálé, Dúró Adélékè, Akínwümí Igólar, and T.M. Ilésanmí. They all have used their creative works to redefine the representation of women. Akinyemi (1987: 110) notes that the most important notion of Obasá about women is their character and beauty. Akinyemi’s work critically examined Obasá’s view about Yorùbá women. According to him, Obasa used his creative ingenuity and cultural understanding to present women based on his knowledge of the norms and customs of the society. He showcased sundry practices which Yorùbá women do to justify their being labeled as mothers, wives, help mates, comforters, etc. Regardless of stereotypical depiction of women among the Yorùbá people, their women are not totally marginalized.

**Images of Women in Obasá Poetry**

Various images of women are discernible in Obasa’s poems. These are discussed in the remaining section of this essay. In Obasá’s poems we found positive representation of women For instance, in one poems, he states that,

À ní sòrò obinrin  
Nwón ni ká sọ ó bà-à-rà  
Ká mènu kúrò  
Bí a bá pa bàrà tán  
Tani yóò lọ̀ rẹ́ ̀fò́ ọ̀?  (Obasá, 1934: 16).

We are discussing women issues  
They said we should discuss it minimally  
And forget about it  
After the melon creeper is harvested  
Who will wash it?
The above excerpt of Obasa’s poem can be further explained through the “Odù Ogbèsé” in Ifá corpus which corroborates the collaboration between men and women in Yorùbá society:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ìwo } & \text{ ako} \\
\text{Èmi } & \text{ abo} \\
\text{Èjé } & \text{jájó máa tójú ara wa} \\
\text{Ìwo } & \text{ ò yè} \\
\text{Èmi } & \text{ ò yè} \\
\text{Yangí ilé} \\
\text{Wọn kí í yelé} \\
\text{Èjé ká máa tójú ara wa} \quad \text{(Odegbola 2014: 95).}
\end{align*}
\]

You are male
I am female
Let us take care of each other
You stand firm
I stand firm
The basement of house
Does not fail the house
Let us take care of each other

The above excerpts of Ifa and Obasa’s poetry testify to the role of women in supporting the men folk in the society. Also, the excerpts show that the concerted efforts of men and women will lead to fruitfulness and productivity in the society. This is in line with Chukwuman’s (1990/91) position that “(African) feminism is not a question of superiority or inferiority. It is a question of complimentarily and recognition” (7). This is in contrast to the erroneous belief that Yorùbá women are not valuable, or that they are lazy, or irrelevant. Rather, the excerpts confirm that women are diligent and that they are helpmates to men.

Obasa also describes women as preservers of homes, and that they are good caretakers of the domestic sphere. This is demonstrated in his poem below.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{A kò lóbìnrin} \\
\text{À ná dá óyó sí} \\
\text{Bí a bá dá óyó sí} \\
\text{Ewúrẹ ní fi í jẹ} \quad \text{(Obasa 1982: 55).}
\end{align*}
\]

We have no woman (wife at home)
We are preserving the *corchorus olitorius* vegetable
If we preserve the *corchorus olitorius* vegetable
It is the goat that will eat it.

*Corchorus olitorius* is one of the common vegetables among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria. The above excerpt reveals that women, as caretakers of homes are the ones who can ensure that such vegetables, if harvested, will be properly taken care of. If women, who are the housemakers refuse to take care of the vegetable, then it will not be useful for consumption. Consequentially, the excerpt is referring to women as agent of preservation.

In Acholononu’s (1995) view, the place of women as mothers and wives in Africa is enormous. Kóláwolé (1997) corroborates this assertion that, “The African women cherished her role as a homemaker as well as her status as a mother or potential mother” (30). As remarked by Sheu (2001), “woman is the one that makes life meaningful for man, without the woman, a man is incomplete” (12). African women are associated with cooking, which is regarded as part of their domestic duties. Women see cooking meals as their responsibility. This African belief about women as good cooks and as holders of domestic sphere is shown in Ṣbasá’s poem below:

buquerque ̀parò dálá
ọyi shìyàn jẹ̀ (Ṣbasá 1945: 21).

Wife prepares bush fowl with okro soup
The husband eats excess pounded yam

Apart from food preparations, there are other multifarious prominent roles played by women in Yorùbá society. As mothers and wives, their roles can never be overemphasized. The roles of women in African society have been discussed by many African writers who are feminist and womanist in their own right. One of such writers is Acholonu (1995) who posits that:

The African woman is known for her ability to combine several roles and to function in various capacities within her society. Because, the society depend so much on her strength and resilience as the matrix of life in its varied dimensions, it places on her the burden of embodying the two opposing qualities that confront life at all levels; she is at once the high mountain and the deep valley and beside it (24-25).

Women are presented in different ways in Ṣbasá’s poetry. The importance of women as mothers is portrayed in the excerpt below from one of his poems:

Ọtò nifèè baba
Olúborí nifèè iyá
The father’s love is one kind of love
(But) mother’s love is the most valued
There is nothing a mother
Will not do for her child
Affinity of the child to the mother is like the garment/cloth on the body

The womb to tomb continuum is, therefore indicative of man’s life circle. Besides, since conception is at the beginning of life and extinction is at the expiry of the same life, it appears that at the extreme end to the left of life, women stand to originate life… she provides the first shelter for man in her stomach… This further confirms the power of women to complete man’s circle of life. It is as if to say that woman is the force behind man’s various movements from the womb to life (170).

Considering the assertion in the above quotation, the love of mothers for their children is greater than that of the fathers because of the incomparable intimacy between mothers and their children. The love of mothers for their children is recognized in terms of pregnancy, child delivery, breast feeding, child care, and many other obligations attached to motherhood in. This also corroborates Horney’s (1967) view concerning women that, “The mother initially has complete power over the child’s satisfaction of needs and forbids instinctual activities, by encouraging the child first” (11). The above view illustrates that the role of women as mothers should not be underestimated.

**Women and Body Politics in Obasa’s Poetry**

Yorùbá regards beauty as natural gift. Also, they believe that women are naturally more beautiful than men. The belief of the Yoruba people that women are naturally elegant when compared to men is equally discernible in the poetry of Obasa. This is similar to the view expressed by Ajibádé (2008) that, “Women are naturally elegant when compared to men: and they become...
more elegant when they use cosmetics or any other forms of make-up” (281). Obasá in his poetry appreciates the beauty of women. Here is an excerpt:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ọpělẹ́ngẹ́ subú làwo kò fó} \\
\text{Ọ subú lodó, odó ya} \\
\text{Obinrin tèrè ye ọko rè níjó ijó} \\
\text{Igi tèrè yeğbò} \\
\text{Ọsùmàrè yòrun} \\
\text{A róge-má-séjú ò} \\
\text{Ìwòn lòràn dún mọ} \quad (Ọbasá 1934: 3). \\
\end{align*}
\]

A tall, slim lady fell upon plates, the plates did not break
(But) she fell upon the mortar, the mortar breaks
A tall, slim lady befits her husband during dancing
A slim tree beautifies the forest
The rainbow beautifies the sky
One who gazes at a beautiful lady intimately
Should be careful not to do that excessively

The excerpt above reveals the Yorùbá view that the appearance of women is always a source of attraction to men. For Obasá, natural beauty, body decoration, and proper body care can enhance a woman’s beauty and make them attractive. The example below is from the poem titled “Ewà”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Aájò ewà ni, aájò ewà ni} \\
\text{Elétí ní lútí} \\
\text{Torí aájò ewà ni} \\
\text{Olórí n dirí} \\
\text{Torí aájò ewà ni} \\
\text{Tírò̀, ọsè, kàinrinkàn, osùn} \\
\text{Gbogbo è, gbògbò è} \\
\text{Torí aájò ewà ni} \\
\text{Ewà lowó, owó lèwà} \quad (Obasa, 1934:3). \\
\end{align*}
\]

It is for the care of beauty, it is for the care of beauty
The owner of the ear perforates her ears
All for the care of (her) beauty
The owner of hair plaits her hair
All for the care of (her) beauty
Black lead, soap, sponge, cam wood
Everything, in entirety
All for the care of (her) beauty
Beauty brings money, beauty is expensive.

From the above excerpt, we can see certain issues that are related to the physical appearance of women and their social interaction with their male counterpart. One, women use various cosmetics for aesthetic purpose. Two, the use of cosmetics in various forms involves women spending money to maintain their beauty. It also shows that Yorùbá women are fashionable. Undoubtedly, Ọbasá’s poetry is in line with Yorùbá view that before anyone could be attractive, there is the need for him or her to take proper care of his or her body. It is worthy of note that Ọbasá appreciates the beauty of women despite gender imbalance in his society.

**Women’s Character in Ọbasá’s Poetry**

The poet portrays the thoughts and beliefs of Yorùbá on good characters (ìwà ọmọlàùbít) expected of all human beings. To the Yorùbá people, character is associated with beauty and when one lacks good character, then beauty is nothing. Ọbasá confirms this in the poem below:

Ìwà rere lèsò èniyàn
Ìwà, ìwà, là n’wá ìwà
Bòbinrin dára bí ẹgbárá
Bí kò níwà
Ọmọlàngidi ni (Ọbasá 1934: 12).

Good character is the beauty of a person
Character is what we desire
No matter how extraordinarily beautiful a lady is
If she lacks good character
She is nothing more than a wooden doll.

From the above, Obasa asserts that good character is vital in human relationship and sustainable development. This is in tandem with Ajibade’s (2008) position that, “…good character entices and attracts other people and benefit for vital living, while bad character repels the same...bodily beauty devoid of good character is useless and lifeless since its worth nothing other than a wooden doll” (280). The following excerpt of Ifá poetry also corroborates this Yorùbá view that,

… ló difá fún Òrùnmilà
Baba n’lo gbé Ìwà níyàwó
Nígbà tí Òrúnmílà yóò kókó gbéyàwó
Ìwà ló gbé níyàwó
Ìwà sí rèé
Sùùrù ló bí i. (Odegbola 2014: 75).

…Divination was performed for Òrúnmílà
Òrúnmílà was getting married to Ìwà (character)
When Òrúnmílà wanted to get married
He married Ìwà (Character)
Ìwà (Character), the daughter of Patience.

Stereotypical views about Women in Obasà’s Poetry

Many societies in Africa relegate their women to the background and reduce them to mere subordinates. Eventually, some African male writers do injustice to issues that affect female gender because of their patriarchal orientation. According to Eruaga (2018: 212), patriarchy as ideology, privileges a male-centered society and encourages male control. It places authority, control, superiority, and supremacy in the hands of the male, father, brother, and uncle.

Also, Akínyemí (1991) states that Obasà’s view about women reveals that they are talkative, jealous, backbiters, and wayward. But in Akinyemi’s view, while there are some women who are bad as pointed out in Obasà’s poetry, many women are also of good characters. Obasà in his poetry states that,

A kí iyàwò kò jé
A fún un lówó
Ó gbówó lọ    (Obasà 1982: 4).

We greeted the wife but she did not respond
We offered her money
She took it and went away

The impression created in the above poem is that women cherish money more than genuine love. They are thus perceived as tricksters and covetous beings. Furthermore, Obasà in his work presents women as evil. In the poem “Èta-N’ta-gbá”, Obasà writes,

Bó o r’Èsù ò yà fún-un
Obinrin Abini b’Èsù      (Obasà 1934: 18).
When you see the devil, move away from him
Women can push one to the devil

Without mincing words, the poet shows that women are personifications of violence. It is clearly noted that this is a misogynous message to disparage the status of women.

Another poem of Obasá reiterates that women are generally lenient on their children, which may have negative effect on their upbringing. The poem reads thus:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Omo dà iyà rè lójú} \\
\text{Jo mì, jọ mì, o kò sàijọ mì} \\
\text{Baba omọ ní sọ lènu} \\
\text{Omọ eni ibá joni} \\
\text{À bá yò tí tí} \\
\text{Àwọn obinrin kóbinrin kì í jé} \\
\text{Kómọ ó jọ baba rè tó bí i (Obasá 1934: 19).}
\end{align*}
\]

It is only the mother who knows the father of her child
Resemble me, resemble me, you must resemble me
The father that insists a child must resemble him must be careful
If one’s child resembles one
One will be very happy
Some woman will never allow
The child to resemble his/her biological father

Yusuf (1996) affirms this position as well, that, “As much as mothers can contribute to the development of the society, they can equally destroy the society roles as expected” (75). However, due to the patriarchal stereotype of women, the society shifts all the blames on women on what affect both parents. Another feminine stereotype of women in Obasá’s work says that,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Èmeji laya olè sùnmú sí} \\
\text{Ijó ọwó ọko bá dẹ} \\
\text{Àsèdà ṣe ṣe aṣẹtẹ} \\
\text{Ojọ tòwọ bá bọkọ} \\
\text{Orí ẹwé dì gbii} \\
\text{Nídií ọgún lójà ọba} \\
\text{Aya káti ó n’ sùnmú sí (Obasá 1934: 11).}
\end{align*}
\]

The wife of a thief have running nose twice
The day her husband succeeds in his business
They will have more than enough to eat
The day her husband is captured
When his head rolls
In Ogun’s shrine at the king’s market

The above excerpt portrays women as humans who are only out to enjoy. They are not ready to endure the hardships brought about by the setbacks in their husbands’ business. The mindset of superiority of men over women is shown in the above excerpt. It is not true that all women abandon their husbands when the family is experiencing difficulties. In the corpus of Ifá, in Èjìogbè, Ààbò, the wife of Ôrūnmìlà stood by her husband in difficult times,

Òdá owó, awo Kóro
Ààbò, obinrin rè...
Bi òdá owó sè n da mi.
Bèè ni Ààbò mi n’bò mí... (Abimbola 1968: 20).

Considering the above Ifá corpus, it shows that women can stand as the pillar to rescue their family when there is need for that. Their position in the society is not mainly for cooking and childbearing.

Ôbasá also portrays women as hypocrites, tale-bearers and backbiters. He writes:

Ènu ò ménu, ètè ò métè
Obinrin kò lè rí kó má wí
Âtârí obinrin kò gbawo
Ó délè ó rò fòbinrin
Ó bawo jè, ó fáyé lójú (Ôbasá 1934: 21).

They will not keep quiet, they will not keep shut.
Women cannot see without saying it
Women cannot keep secrets
If you reveal secrets to women
They will discuss it in the open, and create problem.
The above poem shows the patriarchal opinion on women that they cannot keep secrets. In another poem, Qbasá says:

\[
Panságà abiya ko be\'ẹrè
A ni ogbó mà n’de
Ó loun kọ gbọ
Obinrin n’heúù
Inú rẹ bàjẹ (Qbasá 1934: 17).
\]

Adulteress of many mother in-laws
People say, “you are getting older”
She responds, “I am not getting older”
When a woman starts to grow grey hair
She becomes unhappy.

This presentation depicts women as being promiscuous. Although both genders are supposed to bear the blame men are left out because of gender bias and patriarchal hoax that exists in the society.

**Conclusion**

This essay has discussed the depiction of women in Qbasá’s poetry, a topic that has not been given adequate attention by earlier scholars. The study reveals that the representation of women in the poetry of Obasa did not go beyond the stereotypical and derogatory portrayal of women among the Yoruba. Our position is that Qbasá should have devoted a number of his poems to men’s attributes as well. That would ensure gender balance. Finally, authors of literary works should pay more attention to the positive roles of women in the society without prejudice or bias.

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