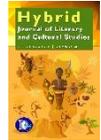




Changing masculine attitude to gender issues: A study of selected Nigerian male feminists' novels



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Abstract

Women have over the years been at the forefront of changing the negative perceptions about them in patriarchal societies. The feminist novel in Nigeria has afforded female writers a platform to express their sad experiences and desire to change the status quo. Interestingly, men who have hitherto shied away from feminist struggles have begun to champion the cause. Adopting the feminist theory, this paper discusses the contributions made by Felix Ogoanah, Abubakar Gimba and Tanure Ojaide in creating awareness on the need to change negative masculine attitude to gender issues. These male authors with feminist inclinations have used their works to sensitise the public on the dangers of women oppression and the need to protect their rights. Also, the works of male feminists are geared towards entrenching a positive attitudinal change in male-female relations. The study concludes that complementarity between the sexes will encourage better gender relations.

Keywords: attitude, awareness, change, male, patriarchy



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Public Interest Statement

Over the years, research on feminism in Nigeria is centered around the roles women play in the quest for gender equity, female empowerment and emancipation. Men are mostly regarded as the oppressor and women, the victims. Little is said about the positive roles men play in championing the course of women in patriarchal societies. The study discusses the works of male authors with feminist inclinations and the steps they have taken towards sensitising the public on the dangers of women oppression and the need for positive attitudinal change in male-female relations.

Introduction

Since the advent of the feminist movement in Nigeria and the increasing awareness of women about their rights and the power of the pen in addressing issues that are peculiar to women, there has been stiff opposition from members of the society, especially the male folk. The women that identify with the feminist movement are regarded as disgruntled and frustrated women that have decided to embrace western culture in order to have an avenue to vent their frustrations.

Interestingly, in recent years, there has been a remarkable change, awareness and recognition in the Nigerian society in the perception of feminism thereby leading to an increased consciousness of the plight of women and the need to improve their lot in patriarchal societies. The issues that are peculiar to women such as spousal abuse, violence against women, unwholesome widowhood practices, and discrimination against women, have been of major concern to legislators, non-governmental organisations and women's societies. The sensitisation of the public on the oppression of women and the need to protect their rights has led to a renewed interest of the male folk in championing the cause of women and exploring ways of liberating women from the shackles of tradition, culture and societal norms that tend to inhibit the emancipation of women. Although such men in Nigerian parlance are called 'woman wrapper', they have realised the need to protect women's interest and ensure gender equity, fair play and justice. In essence, men are beginning to realise the need for a positive attitudinal change towards women's issues and the positive role that women can play towards the development of society. The actions of these men align with bell hooks definition of feminism as 'a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression' (viii). Kannen avers that this definition 'accounts for the possibility of feminist men, as women alone cannot end societal oppressions' (np). Sylvester-Molemodile and Mba agree that

Even various well-meaning males realise the necessity of empowering women, exercising free exploration of feminine potentials and its contributions to societal development. Hence, 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. (108)

Also, Muhammed et al opine that 'feminism is not only by and about women as men too have risen in defence of women' (137).

Some male novelists have made a deliberate move towards writing more sympathetically about women and portraying their plight thereby using their literary works as an avenue for the voices of women to be heard. Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* (2007) and Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* (2006) explore the phenomenon of sex slavery. They examine a society that takes advantage of women and sees them as objects to be abused, used and then discarded. Chukwuemka Ike in *Conspiracy of Silence* (2001) explores the theme of fatherlessness in contemporary Nigerian society. He demonstrates the roles played by women in ensuring that fatherlessness and its attendant negative effect on the society are brought to an end. Abubakar Gimba has also shown consistency in his feminist inclinations in his earlier novels *Witnesses to Tears* (1986) and *Trail of Sacrifice* (1985). Eko describes the works of these male authors as 'a groundbreaking example of the African male authors' shift from portraying women as objects to that of subjects' (212). Although some male writers could not be branded male feminists writers having established their status earlier on, they recently tilt towards a favourable moderation of female characters in their works to accord some positive values to women. Nwahunanya agrees that 'the older male writers like Achebe and Amadi who have stood accused in the denigration of women in their novels have, in their most recent novels, attempted a sympathetic updating of the female image' (195).

Attitude involves feelings, beliefs and behaviours that are formed, nurtured and perpetuated by society, institutions, religions and families, among others. They form the basis of one's perception of what is right or wrong and the way men and women relate to each other within the home and in society. In patriarchal societies, there is a negative attitude towards women which tends to put the woman in a disadvantaged position. These male novelists in their fictional works address the negative attitude of men towards gender issues intending to bring about a positive attitudinal change.

Gender Stereotypes

In patriarchal societies, women are seen as sex objects that should be taken advantage of at the slightest opportunity. Such men regard women as objects that can be used to satisfy their inordinate sexual desire and untamed lust. In Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apples* (1994), Dan Easker is bent on raping Zahrah at gunpoint until she lies to him that her husband just divorced her because she is HIV positive. He takes advantage of her desperate need for transportation from New Tymbuktu to her grandmother's place at

Minsra and she is traumatised by the supposed death of her three children that are set ablaze in her car by an irate mob. Although Zahrah is initially sceptical about accepting a free ride from a stranger, she eventually accepts Dan Easker's offer when she realises that she will not be able to get a commercial vehicle to her grandmother's place that night. Dan Easker reveals his motive of offering to take her to the nearest place to her destination after his initial display of gentlemanliness. He only refrains from raping her when he discovers that he is at the risk of contracting the dreaded HIV/AIDS disease. In the same vein, the government officials in Felix Ogoanah's *The Return of Ameze* (2007) engage the services of pimps to get them young girls that will satisfy their sexual desire after a government function. These men regard women and alcohol as inseparable objects that can be used to indulge the inordinate desires of men. The men take the girls to their hotel rooms and pay them pittance at the end.

It is erroneously perceived in patriarchal societies that a woman cannot succeed in her chosen career and be elevated to the position of authority without giving in to the sexual advances of the men in authority. Such men are of the view that women do not possess the qualities and requisite qualifications that would naturally qualify them for such promotions, hence the resort to sexual promiscuity to curry favours. Agbada writes that 'patriarchy assumes that no woman is worth her achievement except she surrenders her body in exchange for progress or promotion at work. ... Even when such women show evidence of some acumen, their promotion in the job place is often predicated on the amount of sexual gratification they are willing to grant their male superiors' (15) Midioka, Zahrah's colleague in *Sacred Apples*, insinuates that Zahrah must be having a sexual affair with the Regional Director for her to be promoted and also given the opportunity to head the new investment unit in the establishment. With so much display of sarcasm and obvious jealousy, he tells Zahrah that:

You women always say ... you deserve it ... I worked for four years without any promotion and some people worked for only one year and earn a double promotion ... Yes, you deserve it! There is no fault in gratuitous bawdry benefitting from gracious lewdness. (*Sacred Apples* 89)

In addition to this false allegation, men are also of the view that it is not womanly for a woman to physically assault a man, no matter the provocation, but a woman can be physically battered by a man. Zahrah is shocked by Midioka's uncouth remarks and 'within the blinking of eye, she mustered the strength she could and gave vent to her anger: two stunning slaps to Midioka's face!' (*Sacred Apples* 90). When the Regional Director, Nousah, wades into the quarrel between Zahrah and Midioka, he tells Zahrah that 'for a woman to

first attack a man ... it's unbecoming. Physical violence premeditated by a woman ... it's very odd. ... Women don't do what you did' (*Sacred Apples* 96-97). Zahrah responds to this unfairly stereotyped notion by saying 'I reacted like a normal human being ... women aren't created only to allow men visit all sorts of outrage on them ... you made it seem as if by my gender, I lose the right to react to a situation that was nauseating' (*Sacred Apples* 97). To prove her critics, such as Midioka, wrong, Zahrah demonstrates her abilities in the new unit as the Principal Investment Officer by working tirelessly and making remarkable achievements. As a result, she earns the respect of her superiors and colleagues.

Male feminists decry the abuse of the marriage institution by some men that see it as an avenue to exercise their male authority over the woman and massage their ego. Gimba, in *Sacred Apples*, bemoans the blatant misuse of the divorce right by the man in the Islamic religion. The man can divorce his wife by verbally making the pronouncement three times. However, most men abuse this provision by making the pronouncement at the slightest provocation. Shareef is called upon by man to mediate between him and his wife's family after making the divorce pronouncement. The man regrets his actions and realises that he has made a fatal mistake when after all pleas and entreaties his wife is bent on not returning. While trying to reconcile the two parties, Shareef says, 'why do men recklessly indulge in what God allowed under great pains. Isn't it true that of all the permissible things, Allah hates divorce the most? ... Even things expressly forbidden, men indulge in with pleasurable abandon' (*Sacred Apples* 154). In order to forestall future occurrence, he says that the man 'should suffer the consequences of his thoughtlessness ... but the woman should return on her terms' (*Sacred Apples* 154). Zahrah is also a divorcee as a result of her husband's verbal pronouncement which is based on fabricated accusations levelled against her. Yazid only realises too late that he has divorced his wife of nine years due to impatience, thoughtlessness and lack of fair hearing. Zahrah refuses to go back and rather prefers to live as a single mother. When her grandmother, Zubaydah, tells her to reconcile with her husband, she refuses and tells her that 'When it comes to dealing with women or their wives, many men are guided more by their whims and passions than by principles and religion' (*Sacred Apples* 29). These writers maintain that the marriage institution is the bedrock of any society and the relationship should be based on mutual respect, love and trust thereby creating a conducive environment for the growth of the children. However, the reverse is the case because 'Most men had bastardised the institution and turned marital homes into houses of horror for women ... resulting in abuse and humiliations that place some women only a little above slaves' (*Sacred Apples* 140). In the same vein, Tanure Ojaide, in *The Activist* (2006), portrays wife battering and violence against women as a social menace that needs to be tackled headlong. While thinking about the numerous problems that are plaguing modern

societies such as poverty, homelessness, corruption, embezzlement of public funds and human trafficking, the Activist recognises the fact that 'Too many women suffer battery at the hands of their men; too many helpless women are killed in the hands of psychotic men' (*The Activist* 18).

One of the problems that threaten the success of marriages is infertility. Men that are faced with this challenge in their marriage are quick to lay the blame on their wives without seeking medical help. In most cases, they marry another woman to prove their fertility which may not yield the desired result. Udoma in *The Activist* is dissatisfied with his wife because he feels that she is the cause of their inability to have children after seven years of marriage. When Ebi tells him to get medical help, he insists that his wife is infertile which informs his decision to marry another woman. Due to the preconceived notion that the sole purpose of marriage is procreation, women are regarded as 'baby factories'. Udoma proposes to marry Ebi and shamelessly tells her that he wants Ebi to give him children. Ebi deduces from the discussion that he will send his wife, Jessica, away only after Ebi bears children for him. She sees Udoma's proposal as an insult and tells him that marriage should be based on love, mutual respect and companionship and that having children is only an additional blessing that should not be the yardstick for measuring the success and happiness of any marriage. She outrightly rejects his marriage proposal and rather prefers to remain single.

Many families in contemporary Nigeria suffer from poverty and can barely meet their basic needs. Nevertheless, instead of exploring ways of earning a living, some parents see their daughters as objects that can be trafficked and deceived into prostitution in order to get the family out of poverty. The opinion of the girl is not sought and, in most cases, the parents resort to emotional blackmail in order to get the girl's consent. Fayemi collaborates this position that 'some of the reasons for consenting to and choosing to be trafficked and perhaps be a prostitute are meeting social needs, and family financial challenges, war refugees, defect in moral character, lack of education and loose parental background' (203). In the same vein, Rossi in a 2005 report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) posits that poverty aggravates already desperate conditions of female trafficking caused by conflict, discrimination and repression (np). Mr Ogieva in *The Return of Ameze* says that 'Survival is the language of man. Even animals want to survive. Some of them devour their young to survive' (*The Return of Ameze* 18). He insists that he will send his children abroad to engage in prostitution because he has to survive. Mr Okoro also refuses to listen to his wife's pleas and advice against sending their daughter, Ameze, abroad to become a prostitute. Even when Ameze expresses her fears about going to a strange land on a mission she is not privy to, her father reminds her of his incapacitation and blames her for the family's predicament. Okoro vows to tell his family

members to hold her responsible in case he dies of his ill health and then deceives her into believing that she is going to get a good and decent job in Europe. Agnes, Ameze's friend, is also put under pressure by her parents to go to Europe just like other girls in the community.

It is erroneously perceived that women do not possess the qualities and requisite qualifications that will enable them to vie for elective positions in their community. Such men are of the notion that people aspiring to such positions need stamina, resilience, perseverance and doggedness in order to succeed which, unfortunately, the women do not possess. Farah in Abubakar Gimba's *Footprints* (1998) is an activist, a teacher and a master's degree holder. She is hardworking, bold and airs her views about the happenings in her community. However, when she indicates her desire to vie for the post of the Assistant Secretary in the Teacher's union, her nomination is dropped on the grounds of gender. The men in the union are of the view that she does not possess the wherewithal to carry out such responsibilities.

Patriarchal societies frown at old spinsters and are of the view that such women must have lived an immoral and irresponsible life during their teenage years for them not to be eligible for marriage. Ebi, in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*, is a 39-year old university lecturer at the Niger Delta University and is pursuing a Doctorate degree. Although she is a responsible woman and avoids any form of relationship that will smear her reputation, she is not free from the gossips and insinuations in her community that she is a loose woman, hence she deserves no respect. Her mother also pesters her frequently on the need for her to get married irrespective of the eligibility of the suitor in order to avoid gossips. However, Ebi remains resolute and refuses to be coerced into a marriage relationship that she might regret. She is of the view that she will not get married due to societal pressure, rather she will get married at the right time to a man that loves and respects her. Also, Shareef, in *Sacred Apples*, on one of his visits to Zahrah, tells her it is high time she thought about her status as a divorcee and work towards getting married because 'People are talking' (*Sacred Apples* 109). Zahrah responds that 'the society whispers insinuations at unmarried women, yet sees nothing untoward in men in the same shoes. It is double standard. ... The truth is the things that bachelors do and get away with, spinsters can't' (*Sacred Apples* 109). Ogbujah and Davies opine that 'while male sexual vices are often overlooked, female infidelity is treated with utmost contempt and hostility, resulting in the woman being publicly disgraced' (24).

Patriarchal cultures accord the man the position of superiority; therefore, his attention and love should be sought by women. In most polygamous settings, the wives try to outsmart each other to get the man's undivided attention. Nousah's wives in *Sacred Apples* device various means of ensuring that he loves them more. They go to the extent

of adopting diabolical ways of achieving their aim. In *The Activist*, Ebi earns the Activist's love and respect which eventually culminates in marriage. However, the women and girls in the university community call Ebi 'a robber' because she:

had grabbed to herself a man that they all should have competed for. It was customary for women to compete for the love of a man and a bachelor for that matter. The ways women competed to win a man's heart continued to change, but it was tradition that came from their mothers.... Whether through good cooking, good manners, chatting, or the ultimate one in bed, it had to be competition. But Ebi ... broke the law of competing on a level field. (*The Activist* 117)

To prove her critics wrong, the Activist moves to Ebi's flat. The action infuriates the gossips because it is not African for a man to move to a woman's house. 'It had never happened in the area that a man abandoned his flat or home, however small or unimpressive and moved into a woman's house' (*The Activist* 118). Contrary to speculations that the relationship will not stand the test of time because the Activist has stooped low and abdicated his position of authority and superiority to a woman, their marriage succeeds thereby proving the gossips and critics wrong.

Promoting Positive Attitudinal Change

It is pertinent to note that male feminists portray these negative attitudes of the male folk towards women in order to bring about a positive attitudinal change in their relationship with women. In a bid to serve as a deterrent to men that regard women as sex objects, second class citizens and inferior beings, the male feminists portray male characters that meet a tragic end. Al-Aswad also known as Dan Easker in *Sacred Apples* is sentenced to death for a murder case. Yazid is dishonourably dismissed from his job for physically assaulting his boss whom he discovers is having an illicit sexual relationship with his wife. Chief Okoro in *The Return of Ameze* moves out of his mansion and seeks refuge elsewhere because he is haunted by the ghost of his daughter, Ameze, and is unable to enjoy his ill-gotten wealth. In essence, men are encouraged to accord women the respect that they deserve and regard them as partners and not competitors so as to ensure lasting and sustainable peace in the society. This is exemplified in the loving and cordial relationship that is borne out of mutual respect, trust and understanding that exists between Ebi and the Activist in *The Activist*, Shareef and Zahrah, Miriam and Rashad in *Sacred Apples*, Jibrán and Naasha in *Footprints* and Nicholas and Mary in *The Return of Ameze*.

Conclusion

The study has identified the conscious and deliberate efforts made by male authors in correcting the unbalanced portrayal of female characters in the earlier works authored by the men. The remarkable change and the increase of male authors with feminist inclinations are due to the sensitisation of the public on the oppression of women and the need to protect their rights. The works of male feminists are geared towards entrenching a positive attitudinal change in male-female relations and they also express the desire to promote values that will ensure mutual respect, unity and complementarity between the sexes. It is believed that when men eschew all forms of discrimination, oppression and subjugation of women by doing away with belief systems, customs and traditions that are detrimental to the women, the society will be a better place.

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