

Barren Rivers and Flowery Women: Metaphors of Domination and Subjugation in Select Poems of Ebi Yeibo and Molar Ogundipe-Leslie

by

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Abstract

This paper critically investigated how contemporary Nigerian poets employ nature as a metaphor to signify the dissonant relationship between the people of the Niger-Delta and the Nigerian government on one hand, and the African women and their men on the other hand. The discussion relied on the templates provided in select poems of Ebi Yeibo and Molar Ogundipe-Leslie. The paper employ Critical Discourse Analysis in combination with ecocritical disposition as a launch-pad to query the power balance that exists within the political arena of Nigeria, especially among the economically exploited people of the Niger-Delta. It explores the poets' presentation of the people's sense of disillusionment and disenchantment with the existing socio-political order which is unfair to the less privileged group(s), and it actually threatens their survival. The images of barren rivers and imprisoned selves portray the African women, the Niger Deltans and their environment as being under grave danger. After years of hoping and long-suffering, the personae now find themselves as paupers and impoverished by agents of the exploitative dominant paradigm. The deference to superior authority that is typically African thus comes under fatal threat. This paper finally posits that respect for nature and its benevolent resources is the surest way to meaningful and sustainable development on the earth for the benefit of all and sundry. Moreover, it insists on a dialogue of reason instead of self-annihilating violence presently prevalent on both sides while not giving up the possible position of power attainable with psychological liberation of the self from the damning hopelessness that each group's situation portends.

Key Words: Niger-Delta, exploitation, violence, psychological liberation, African women

Introduction

Exploitation has allegedly remained the bedfellow of different groups within the Nigerian socio-cultural milieu. The victims of this purported exploitation are said to be women on the one hand and the minority ethnic groups on the other. The persistence of power imbalance within the Nigerian socio-political order has thus given rise to the current unending crises within the family and the larger society. As a result of the on-going and seemingly endless violence within the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, the attention of the national government has become secured and ostensible genuine moves to correct the ills of the past apparently underway. In the same vein, the consistent refusal for true gender mainstreaming has made gender equity an issue of continuing controversy.

For this reason, writers within the Nigerian socio-cultural context continue to raise issues of social relevance that try to highlight the problems noted above. The manner of their going about it differs naturally. The interest in this paper is thus to see how two Nigerian poets, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and Ebi Yeibo, look at the issues above in their poems. It is interesting that, within their poetic worlds, nature plays a prominent role in expressing their view point. It is thus seen that while Ogundipe-Leslie problematises the relationship of women to nature and culture, Yeibo laments the desecration and denigration of nature by the greedy oil exploiters that have impoverished the Niger-Deltans through their exploitative activities.

The issues discussed by the poets are naturally polemical. In view of this, the critical tradition comes handy as a tool for the analysis of their works. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), along with ecocriticism, is engaged to interrogate the focus of interest held by the poets in their works. A critical reading of some selected poems from their collections *A Song for Tomorrow and other Poems* (2003) by Ebi Yeibo and *Sew the Old Days* (1985) by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie is done to arrive at, what is hopefully, a direction to the restoration of the Nigerian equilibrium.

A literature review is done in the next section to essentially look at the current thinking within the CDA and ecocritical tradition. A linking point is found between these theories and the poets' works exposing the employment of metaphoricality and reality to effectively convey their view of the power balance within the Nigerian socio-cultural/socio-political structure.

CDA and Ecocriticism

CDA is about discourse and the way it manifests unfair practices within society. Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak are some of the precursors of CDA. Logically, their focus has to do with linguistic and semiotic employments that manifest power struggle within the society.

Wardhaugh (2006) classifies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a branch of sociolinguistics. It is believed to have originated from the critical tradition of Gramsci. It is a melting point of many disciplines (van Dijk, 1993; Dellinger, 1995; Luke, 1995; McGregor, 2004; Wardhaugh, 2006). Basically, CDA practice acts as a means of interrogating power relations in social discursive practices.

Van Dijk extensively applied this theory to question the way social power is exposed within the media discourse (cf. van Dijk, 1993). In his study, he found that the dominated are usually made to feel they are in control of their destiny while the dominant group is actually in charge. In essence, the dominant ideology makes the dominated to see as correct the order of things in their society and thereby help to sustain this order. Ideology is thus a living force in structuring power relations in society.

What then is ideology all about? Ideology has to do with a system of ideas that people share as the principle guiding their lives. It often directs the actions they take. Jones (2001) notes that ideology works “at the institutional, subjective and text levels to position people in particular ways.” Making reference to van Dijk, Dellinger (1995) opines that ideologies provide the cognitive base for attitudes of various groups in the societies, which eventually furthers their particular interests and objectives. It is therefore not surprising that the dominant group pursues a line of action in which the cognitive foundation upon which social discourses are based is for their own welfare. Van Dijk (1993) argues that this ideological posture results from a particular form of social cognition.

Koller (2004) applied CDA to the analysis of metaphors men employ in describing business women, and those the women also use for self-description. She establishes in her study that the common trend in business media discourse is to make use of hegemonic masculinity to seal the performance level of women through allocating to them the particular operational attainment allowable to them. This is achieved by the manufacture of particular kinds of social cognition through metaphoric descriptions. Consequently, one may say that the major focus of CDA is to interrogate power structures in the society as it is reflected in its discourse. Fairclough (2001 online) avows that the important relevance of CDA is that it can help analyse “the dialectical relationships between discourse...and other elements of social practices.” As Martin and Rose (2003:263) aptly observe, “CDA has tended to focus on semiosis in the service of power.” This fundamental nature of CDA makes it attractive for the interrogation of power structures in societies even as presented in their literature.

Evidently, the socio-political orientation of CDA is not hidden. For this reason it has been accused of being too critical (Martin and Rose, 2003; Wardhaugh, 2006). Martin and Rose (2003) regard its exclusive focus on critical interrogation of power as only one of the ways social structures should be appraised. They advocate that CDA needs to “balance critique with Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA)” (p.264) to the end of enacting reconciliation and making peace. Wardhaugh (2006) charges CDA with being ideologically positioned and judgemental, thereby claiming “high ground on issues” (p.15).

However, dismantling inequality in the social order is essential but it should incorporate fairness to all the parties involved. Supporting this stance, van Dijk (1993) opines that CDA should not be about “villains and victims” (p.255). For this reason, it is necessary to wonder at the way the poets present their issues in the poems under consideration – whether it is to the end of just getting sympathy or of exposing their personae in a matter of fact way to show the actual state of affairs rather than mere sentiment. The question, nonetheless, is that: can sentiment ever be taken out of literature? This may make it lose its tinge of gravity that touches our hearts. Realism may not always be the most effective way of getting across the message to those that matter. Metaphor may also get so high it loses touch with those it seeks to communicate with. Nevertheless, CDA’s polemic nature links it to ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism is very critical of the human exploitation of nature towards a negative end. Dickinson (2004:34) asserts that ecocriticism tends to be focused on issues that concern environmental crisis as well as those with “readily identifiable activist dimension.” It is of interest to note that this may not always be the case as metaphorical representations may go beyond what he describes as the constant pursuit of realism within the ecocritical field. The concern goes beyond mere representations of reality of environmental crisis to include suggestions of oppressive structures that either result in actual domination through direct cum indirect dispossession of the earth resource. It could also be seen that a writer’s work may include an actual reference to issues that informed the dispossession. This could make the nature of such works more of metaphorical representations. This sort of argument Dickinson (2004) also advances in the course of his discussions. Nonetheless, our view of the matter is that within the poems of Yeibo and Ogundipe-Leslie, both metaphoric and realistic portrayal of the power situation in the Nigerian socio-cultural/political milieu are manifest as nature is employed as the avenue of making critical confrontation of the power imbalance the Nigerian society represents in its current social order within its political and gender relations.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and Ebi Yeibo

The two poets are Nigerians. While Ogundipe-Leslie could be described as a Nigerian in Diaspora in terms of residence and marriage, Yeibo may be more aptly described as a home grown Nigerian poet. While Ogundipe-Leslie hails from the South West Yoruba country, Yeibo’s roots are deep in the swamps of the Niger-Delta. These naturally influence the focus of their polemics. Ogundipe-Leslie is famous for her militancy in woman activism (Adebayo, 1996). Like other poets and artistes from the Niger-Delta region, Yeibo’s concerns are with his people who bear the brunt of the environmental degradation being experienced in the area for decades now. The despondency that has become palpable in the face of the unrelenting gender and political assault on the sensibilities of the minorities of the Niger-Delta people and the Nigerian women could be seen in the writings of the poets. They thus form a link in the dissonance that holds them firm in its grip to the relentlessness of the oppressor. As the saying goes, when a goat is pursued to the wall, it may turn back on its tormentor.

This thus warns that the deference that the Nigerian people normally gives to its leadership is in grave danger of being eroded due to the persistence of the oppressive practices with the society. The fear of this happening within the socio-political and socio-cultural context called Nigeria makes the poets' voices to resonate in equal relentlessness to save the nation from itself.

A Song and More Songs

Ideological orientation of the writers has a great deal of impact on their works apparently. Ogundipe-Leslie's feminist sympathies are quite obvious, even though she is said to have moved to the moderate right in her ideological posturing (Adebayo, 1996). Her poems in the collection being analysed here are clearly polemical and thus very militant. Her presentation of the African woman makes her definitely victimised but called to rise up to fight for her true place in the scheme of things.

Yeibo's political posturing is as vehemently protestant. He demands for justice for the people of the Niger-Delta, and insists on it. The difference between the two poets is basically that of the personae. One could not accuse either of being less forceful than the other. They are also both very expressive in the floral and fauna images they deploy in conveying their thoughts. Realism is not really the focus as they use natural imagery in the service of power struggle effectively in their pursuits. Nonetheless, to deny that there are actually barren rivers in the Niger-Delta is to run away from the reality of what the Nigerian modern political oligarchy has done to the people of this area. This is the reality that Yeibo paints so vividly for us in his poems. An example is the poem, "Barren Rivers", on page 29 of his collection of songs (or more appropriately, dirges). He laments that in the days gone by, the Delta creeks gave life to the dwellers but presently, the same creeks deny the people of the pleasure of their swampy secrets. Their labours in these previously delightful gifts of nature have become futile and fruitless.

YESTERDAY

How can we forget
The stirring songs of crickets...
The fresh breath of fishes
The turtle that brimmed our meals
The alligators that crammed our canoes...

But TODAY:

Fishermen sweat for nothing
They say:
Oil has poisoned our river.

It is for this reason of the poisoning oil that “Today” is no longer like the fruitful yesterday. The helplessness of these folks in the face of the dominant force “They” is palpable as the other that oppresses. Who are the ‘they’ that say the rivers are poisoned? Who poisoned the rivers? The use of ‘they’ thus suggests a tone of gossip, a fear to apportion responsibility of agency of the source of the piece of information being given out. In this wise, the actual responsibility have exophoric reference that cannot be pinned down even though the reality that stares the Niger-Delta dwellers in the face is that their fishermen toil for nothing while the political oligarchy consistently smiles to the bank as the oil politics enriches the coffers of the nation and, consequently, those that have access to it. But in their little world, even the little access they have to economic power through their creeks is shrinking; all because of the desecration of the natural habitat of the sea creatures that gave them pleasure and nourishment.

This is more poignantly presented in the two poems Warri crisis I and II. The palpable overbearing force exerted by “the headquarters” and the almost tangible fear and destruction that followed could be seen in such imageries like that of “corpses floating in the river like doped fishes”, “bodies lying lifeless like logs”, “supple souls smoked out of their holes” all which result from the “vocal guns and missiles” exchanged between “headquarters” and “armed lads” (40). In the course of these exchanges, peace was torn from the human heart into wanton shred “like an obsolete piece of rag”. So,

Tension grips the helpless air
As age-long mansions and skyscrapers
Unscathed by rain or thunder
Explode in excruciating flames
The atmosphere a pall of smoke. (44)

All these are naturally very graphic realist picture of the goings on in the Niger-Delta as presented by the writer, but obviously, it goes beyond mere realism as the pictures painted here also symbolise the power relations between the people of the Niger-Delta and the Nigerian power brokers. The power equation is apparently not balanced as shown by such lines like:

O tell me
What the green gods say
Concerning crying clans of the creeks
Black-gold-glutted creeks
Doomed with barren beaches
And poisoned field
Coalpots and canisters
Wild with framed fates.
(41)

Clearly, “the green gods” is a reference to the soldier elites ruling the country at the height of the Warri crisis in the 90s. What these green gods say about the people of the Niger-Delta is thus as important as the air they breathe as it could affect their destiny irrevocably. This is demonstrated in the power to kill and make alive that the military had on the people of the area at the time. The despotic nature of the erstwhile Abacha government is surely no news. If any evidence of this is required, all one needs to confirm it is the Federal murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a Niger-Delta environmental activist, in November 1995, for protesting against the injustice done to his people by the environment desecrating multinational oil cartel operating in the Delta creeks. This goes to prove that power is actually not with those whose environment is being abused by the oil oligarchy. The “Other” is apparently this exploiting and poisoning oligarchy that was ruling Nigeria with iron fist.

Moreover, the hopelessness and helplessness portrayed in the imagery of “crying clans of the creeks” which are the Niger-Deltans, who are doomed with barren beaches due to the “black-gold-glutted creeks” they have does not present the people of this geographical area as occupying a position of power. The poet’s frustration at his people’s helplessness in the face of the economic and political marauders is palpable. His lamentation thus suggests that the exercise of force and cosmetic rhetoric is the most exasperating aspect of the whole problem. This has resulted in the present perpetual crisis among brothers as it obtains now in the region, “havoc keeps vigil with restive lads” (39), which is the current reality in the area. He notes:

Needless to say then
That even blood starved gods of war
Wouldn’t bless a bloodbath
Without end, that embroils all
In a smothering whirlwind
That splits even the naked air
With pregnant hate.

(42)

The hate was so real that it has not been possible to sheathe it since it found its way out. The Nigerian government appears to have lost control of this section of the Nigerian society. This could be accounted for by the constant failure to honour previous promises made, a turning point of which came with the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa by the Federal Military Government. It was at the same spot where the tripod stood to prepare sumptuous meals for the common stomach and the moon smiled with goodwill that the people now view one another with constant suspicion, bad blood, and separated in mind, seeing one another as “poisonous lepers” (45).

Yeibo's presentation of the Nigerian political hegemony could thus be seen as more of a desire for fairness and not hatred (cf. van Dijk, 1993). Nonetheless, his poems expose a simple fact that the unfair balance of power has not only led to frustration on the part of the oppressed, but the oppressed have chosen to rise up in self-preservation even if it means the destruction of the central whole they had previously used their resources to uphold. The end of such a choice can only be fearful for the nation with the largest collection of Africans on earth.

Conversely, Ogun-dipe-Leslie presents a less violent picture of the African woman in her poems. She paints a picture of women that are meant to be seen and not heard like a piece of decorative china doll, which is vividly presented in her "Firi: Eye-flash Poem" on page 43. It reads:

Have you seen at streetside here
suddenly, a girl standing like flowers?

This poem encapsulates the whole concept of what view the poet thinks the society holds of the African woman: just a mere piece of decoration to be admired and ignored. She continues Yeibo's lamentation. This is extensively outlined in the poem "When father experience hits with his hammer." That the poem is a mournful cry for a freedom dearly beloved but lost due to the women's psychological ineptitude is obvious from the first line on page 30.

Lead-in cry

This prepares the context for the dramatology that follows: the story of the 'bourgeoise' African woman. Her story is the story of one long hope lost and the lack of courage to take her decision and stick by it. The personae is made up of a group of educated people that should be powerful due to their exposure to modern Western education but seemed to have become incapacitated to take responsibility for their destiny.

So we meet and infrequently
trading sorrows, stories, myths,
exchanging our marks of Cain,
our scarlet letters and dreams
aborted... (30)

The choice of the word "aborted" in collocation with their dreams suggests that it is not their choice to let go of their dreams of a better life than their mothers; the situation they met in their marriages forced them to let go of these dream. Oriaku (1996) and Ezeigbo (1996) have variously wondered at the modern Nigerian woman's kinds of dreams and the expectation they have in their marriages. The two writers individually conclude that the only thing that seem to be important to the Nigerian woman may be the title of 'wife of' and 'mother of' someone rather than being independent individuals that have a definite self-esteem that gives them all they could have to make them human.

For this reason, their hope is placed on the “Other”, that is usually male, to give them the reality of their dreams. This is demonstrated in the lines below:

They will lead us away, they will;
To monogamous havens
And True Romantic Bliss.

(31)

Their giving the agency of their happiness to others shows a powerless mindset. As van Dijk (1993) rightly observes, social cognition is an important determinant of power structure within a society. These women cling to the hope that males will give them succour through making them into romantic preferred choices. Eventually, when they awake to the reality of their situations, they realise that their men are not angels.

So thirty years after, we stare at
each other with unbelieving eyes,
casualties of wars that we know not,
children of Mother Experience
(or Father Experience)
Who hits with a hammer.
And we smile bleakly...

(31)

The future does not hold much hope for them. They become stoic in the face of their fate, which was their mothers’ before them. All they could do is either to suffer and smile (to borrow a phrase from late Fela Aniklapo-Kuti) in silence or share the cruelty of their fate, which they consider deserved. Alternative choice for them is ego-defence mechanism, to prove to themselves that they are better than others who are not as privileged as them to have monogamous ‘havens’; or console themselves with the thought of their long-suffering being for the sake of their motherhood.

Or we cling to the children
And lie about them; weave
ourselves and reasons round
their blameless necks,
claiming motherhood
where only fear lurks.

(31-32)

It should be obvious that the presence of fear is premised on lack of power. This lack of power is basically psychological, dependent upon the socialisation process the personae had been exposed to. Social cognition thus becomes a major tool that has created this self-defeatist ideology in the women. The poet nonetheless blames the women's fear on the agency of Western cultural pollution, which has infiltrated into the pure African ways of thinking that made the women of old powerful.

This present author has done an extensive inquiry into the power exhibited by the pre-colonial Nigerian women. The finding of this author agrees with the claims of Acholonu (1995) and Bakare-Yusuf (2003) on the issue. However, one continues to be bemused by the fact that daughters of great women like Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan, Moremi Ajasoro of Ile-Ife, Queen Idia of Benin, and Queen Amina of Zazzau could have become so timid in their current social relations compared to their foremothers' historical exploits. Apparently, Ogun-dipe-Leslie's assertion that the African woman aping the Western woman may not be in the African woman's best interest may not be far from being astute. Nonetheless, it is apparent from the prevalent institutional order in Nigeria, which is currently male-controlled (cf. Blay, 2008), that male domination did not come with colonialism. Assuredly, colonialism could have aggravated it through making the African woman even less visible than she previously was. Nevertheless, as rightly observed by Blay (2008), blaming others for all the woes of the African people seems not a self-deterministic mindset.

Ogun-dipe-Leslie views the attempt to truncate the power imbalance through seeking to please the man as futile. So flowering or fattening to decorate his house is an unacceptable choice for the African woman. Enlisting of supernatural help is not too necessary, she insists. It is by taking responsibility for one's destiny that true power balance could be made possible.

But when was the master
ever seduced from power?
When was a system ever broken
by acceptance?
when will the BOSS
hand you power with love?

No, we seek not to know
and seek not to act,
we avoid the political;
astounding or dancing,
we flower or fatten
in general un-knowing
or worry the supernatural
when Father Experience...
he hits with a hammer. (33)

In our view, leaving the agency of positive self-liberating action to the others can only maintain the oppressive social order. Living in convenient ignorance is no longer acceptable for women. We have argued elsewhere (Daniel, 2007) that until the mindset that makes this oppressive system acceptable is subverted in the psychology of women, there can be no other way of doing things than in the way that is supportive of patriarchal order.

Conclusion

This paper analysed selected poems from the works of Ebi Yeibo and Molará Ogundipe-Leslie. It looks at these from the angles of the realist/metaphorist presentation of the situations of the Niger-Delta minority group and African women within the Nigerian socio-cultural and socio-political context. The poets obviously reveal a persistent strangle hold on power by the dominant paradigm represented by the Nigerian central political oligarchy and patriarchy on the ethnic minority and the female. The poets employed eco imageries both realistically and metaphorically to vividly get across their points. The paper submits that the barrenness of the Niger-Delta creeks and the helplessness of the African women in the face of their oppression are due to a long-term psychological submission to the dominant ideology within the Nigerian socio-political and socio-cultural order. The recurrent threat to the Nigerian state thus resides in her maintenance of unfair power balance within the society.

Our view is that the failure of the Nigerian project can be avoided through a repudiation of the oppressive practices as well as a reorientation that does not support the winner takes all philosophy at all levels of the Nigerian body politic as presently obtains. More important, however, is the shedding of the gad of helplessness and hopelessness worn by the oppressed as presented in these works, but without an undue threat to the equilibrium of the nation. Night does not have to overtake the nation when day can be used to talk and resolve all the issues at stake, environmental, psychological, gender, political, and economic inclusive. Indeed as Ebi Yeibo insightful writes:

When night sits unabashed
On a nation's breath
The result is profuse sweat.

“Night” (13)

But has the oppressor ever understood any other language apart from force? This is a choice for the Nigerian society to make.

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