

Patriarchal Oppression: Strategies of Resistance in Selected Stories from Ojaide's *The Debt-Collector and Other Stories*

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Abstract

Patriarchy has placed African women at the lower end of the power relations in the African society. Patriarchal values, principles and perceptions do not only impede the development and advancement of women, but oppress, devalue, marginalize and subject them to various forms of exploitation and abuse even in the 21st Century. Ojaide's female protagonists in "The Origins of Witchcraft", "When the Widow Remarried" and "The Feminist", short stories in *The Debt-Collector and Other Stories*, on which this paper is based, employ strategies of resistance which enable them to assert themselves, challenge and subvert the systemic oppression they encounter in their environments. This paper identifies and analyses these strategies from the radical feminist perspective and evaluates their effectiveness and impact on the protagonists and their actualization.

Keywords:

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Background to the Study

Patriarchal culture and gender inequality have had a great impact on gender relations in the African society. Men, being the rulers in the patriarchal system enforce their authority in all spheres - social, political, economic and religious which has resulted in the subordination of women. Allan G. Johnson acknowledges the impact of gender inequality on the structure of social life. He further explains:

...the ways privilege and oppression are organized through social relationships and [the] unequal distribution of power, opportunities, and resources [are evident] in countless patterns of everyday life in family and work, religion and politics, community and education (36).

Societal expectations of men and women are, therefore, prejudiced by the perception that men are superior to women and this has led to several stereotypical views of both genders. According to Joseph F. Healey, stereotypes are exaggerated, resistant to disproof, and people who are highly prejudiced will stick to their stereotypical views even when faced with massive evidence that they are wrong, for "... once a stereotype is learned, it can shape the perception to the point that the individual pays attention only to information that confirms this stereotype" (110). Unfortunately, patriarchal perceptions and social conditioning in the African society breed stereotypical views which sustain gender inequality and create an imbalance in social relations. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) validates this view by positing that a major characteristic of gender inequality is that, "... males on average [are] better positioned in social, economic, and political hierarchies...[and] gender norms and stereotypes reinforce gendered identities and constrain the behavior of women and men in ways that lead to inequality" (162, 163). Sexism, therefore, thrives in the African society; Teresa Njoku explains it thus:

Sexism involves ... the belittlement and rejection of the realm of experience culturally associated with women. It comes in the form of dismissing women and all issues relating to them as childish, silly, or unimportant. Thus, attributes of strength and power are ascribed to the male while weakness and frailty, both of mind and body, are associated with the female. The male is at the centre of the culture and he is always projected positively while the female is marginalized and prejudicial stereotypes dwarf her image. Consequently, the male provides the social norms (standards of behaviour) and mores (fixed moral customs and standards of a group). The male dominates while the female submits. (277) Gender inequality and sexism are therefore integral aspects of the structures and values of the African society which influence the roles men and women play and how they interact with each other in society.

T. Akachi Ezeigbo remarks that the fact that the African woman constantly face[s] gender inequality and sexism mean[s] facing the realities of the "responsibilities and limitations of being female in a male-dominated society" (xv). Literature, being a mirror of society, reflects these responsibilities and limitations as well as women's responses to them. In the

past, literature portrayed women as weak and unassertive. However, as observed by Iniobong I. Uko, “the coming of age of African literature is identifiable by the true and pragmatic feminization of the literary vision as a way of correcting absurd female images in African literature and culture” (82). The relevance of this study is therefore established in its exploration of how the female protagonists in the selected stories rise above patriarchal oppression and the limitations it imposes on them and, more significantly, how Ojaide, a male author, highlights this in the selected stories.

Theoretical Framework

To effectively explore and analyze the strategies employed by the female protagonists to challenge the systems of male domination and oppression in society, feminism, with emphasis on radical feminism, will serve as the framework for this paper. Radical feminists trace the root cause of women's domination to patriarchal gender relations which reinforce women's oppression. They believe that patriarchy accords men a dominant social status which promotes gender inequality and the subordination of women through sexual, emotional and physical exploitation. Many women are, therefore, victims of the aggressiveness, violence and exploitation through which men directly or indirectly seek control over them, which is evident in the context of the selected stories.

Therefore, radical feminists' challenge of the “the deep-seated denigration and control of women in [the] gendered social order” (Lorber136) rooted in patriarchy, makes radical feminism a suitable theory for the exploration of the strategies of resistance adopted by the female protagonists, as well as their effectiveness in challenging the various patriarchal tools employed by men to oppress them.

Literature Review

Ojaide is critically celebrated as a prolific poet. However, as noted by Sunny Awhefeada, his literary career “is also remarkable for his highly successful cross-generic experimentation [having ventured] into the domain of prose fiction weaving significant narratives that portray his comprehension of the anatomy of the craft of fiction” (“Ojaide: Literary Activism”). Inevitably, Ojaide's fictional works echo some of the major themes of his poetic representations. One of the pleasant outcomes of his “cross-generic experimentation” is *The Debt-Collector and Other Stories* published in 2009.

Uzoechi Nwagbara remarks that Ojaide's works “uncompromisingly reflect a genuine mediation in the realm of social facts - particularly in the Niger Delta ... the trademark of his artistic enterprise” (228). This observation is in line with Ojaide's assertion that the roots of the creative writer are “very important in understanding his or her work” (*African Books Collective*, 2015). F. Odun Balogun further validates this observation by asserting that the collection does not only establish Ojaide's position as a master of the genre but also “resonates realistically with its setting, portraying with freshness of insight familiar themes of Nigerian life” (Blurb).

For Dike Okoro, the themes portrayed in these short stories, some of which he identifies as myths, witchcraft, pride, greed, culture and family conflicts and the impact of fate on the lives of people, reveal “a lot about [Ojaide's] familiarity with recent Nigerian history and the inescapable wave of conflicts people, especially the middleclass and poor families experience ...” (“Review”). In a similar vein, Syl Cheney-Coker also views the stories as offering “a contemporary view of Nigerian society, ranging from the cultural to the politically mundane in which life is depicted as an urgent drive towards social expediency” (Blurb).

Evidently, Ojaide's concerns about the welfare of the people of the Niger Delta, men and women, are strongly reflected in his literary works, having recognized the need for literature “to draw attention to the gap between the haves and the have-nots ... [and its potency as] a weapon against denial of basic human rights” (Ojaide, 1996, 42). Like many African writers who are proponents of feminism, he recognizes women's rights as human rights, and this underlies his commitment to advocate for African women's upliftment by challenging those patriarchal values and structures in society that subjugate them. Thus, as Badaki and Adam discover in their study of the feminist trends in Ojaide's poetry, “the feminist perspective is very visible in his works as “he leans towards themes related to gender issues ... [evident in] his feminist treatment of patriarchal influence, gender revolt, and cultural demands” (2015, p. 125) which abound in the African society and Nigeria in particular.

Noticeably, *The Debt-Collector and Other Stories* has not received the critical attention it deserves although the collection has clearly identified Ojaide as one of the African writers who have “approached the issue of women from several perspectives ... [and as being more] direct in portraying the abuse of and revolt of women than most Nigerian writers who treat feminist themes” (Badaki and Adam abstract). This study is, therefore, significant because it highlights the author's recognition of, and “vehement challenge to the female obdurate naivety and congenital passiveness that hitherto has dominated the configuration of African women in literary works” (Uko82). In so doing, Ojaide demonstrates that the female protagonists in the selected works transcend what Uko refers to as “the condescending and stereotypic images that compel women in Africa to be excluded from the centre and to be treated as outcasts in crucial socio-political process” (85).

Methodology

Through a close reading of the selected texts, the various forms of patriarchal oppression encountered by the female protagonists will be examined and the strategies they employ to resist and surmount them identified. Through this, it will be established that women are no longer bound by the culture of invisibility, silence and passivity that subdued them in the past.

Strategies of Women's Resistance

In the stories under study, Ojaide's female protagonists prove to be strong, resourceful and assertive women who are quick to assess the patriarchal oppressions they face and

devise strategies to overcome them. These strategies and their effectiveness are discussed in the succeeding segments.

The Origins of Witchcraft

Patriarchy in the African society has, for a long time, reinforced the subordination of women, especially through gender roles. While men have the freedom and opportunities to express themselves in varieties of ways, women are controlled and limited in the expression of their freedom by the code of conduct imposed on them by traditional and cultural role expectations. Nothing reveals this more so than the love relationship between men and women in "The Origin of Witchcraft." From the very beginning of the story, the reader is acquainted with the fact that "Love [is] so possessive that it [leaves] no room for another person to be involved in a relationship between a man and a woman, husband and wife" (2). Commitment, trust and faithfulness should be the underlying qualities of this relationship. However, in the story, while women are honest, committed and faithful, men easily stray because of their superiority complex, the need to assert their authority over women and to prove their manhood by straying.

Even when there is evidence of dissatisfaction in a marriage, women are supposed to be "satisfied [just to have] their husbands around when they need... them" (2) because they have been socially conditioned to value and remain faithful in their relationships or risk being judged by society as being morally loose. On the other hand, failure on the part of men to show commitment and faithfulness in their relationships is often overlooked as we witness in the story:

... men blatantly disregarded women's feelings to do whatever they liked. Women were hesitant and afraid of repercussions of straying from the matrimonial bed ... But men had such insatiable desires that they made nonsense of love. They said they wanted variety, as if women did not want the same. (2)

This attitude on the part of men is worsened by the fact that tradition sanctions polygyny which grants them the opportunity to marry many wives and behave as they please while women are, ironically, constrained to remain faithful to them no matter what. This is illustrated through Mukoro and Jevwe's marriage. Mukoro, described as a consummate flirt, pursues Jevwe, an innocent virgin, relentlessly until, having convinced her through deceit and trickery of his undying love for her, he wins her over and they eventually get married. Their seemingly happy marriage begins to unravel when Mukoro meets Agnes and transfers his affections to her. He takes pride in her virginity despite her age and maturity and "...like a conqueror relishing his victory over a powerful force ... [he] saw himself as special for the privilege that Agnes had reserved for him" (7).

Mukoro marries Agnes without Jevwe's knowledge and practically abandons his home with Jevwe. When Jevwe questions him about the change in his attitude - his avoidance of her food and any form of intimacy with her - he intimidates her by asking if she is his boss. When she complains to an older woman about the changes she has observed in him, the old woman responds: "Husbands are dogs ... Okpara men are worse than goats!" (8-9).

Jevwe does not want to lose her husband so she begins to strategize. She changes the power dynamics in her home through what the narrator refers to as witchcraft, a counterforce, to deal with Mukoro's dictatorial attitude, his betrayal and desertion. She obtains this power from a cult through which women rebel against and gain freedom from patriarchal constraints which subjugate and marginalize them. Through this power, "... they could ... exercise freedom of movement ... no one barked at them, asking where they were going. Nobody latched them onto babies. No father or husband had power to stop them from flying to wherever their conclave held" (1).

Mukoro suffers a massive stroke that leaves him not only incapacitated but also abandoned by Agnes. He has no choice than to return home to Jevwe who seeming accepts him back without any question but drastically reverses the power dynamics in her marriage which had made her vulnerable to Mukoro's manipulations and neglect. She rebels against his "harsh and senseless domination and insatiable desire to have many women at his beck and call" (1) and against conforming to the traditional norms of deference that demand she accept her husband's betrayal and desertion. She insists on individual freedom in her marriage. The irony is that this rebellion results in Mukoro being caged and confined to his bed, "the sexually insatiable man now paralyzed from waist down ... the man who had left her begging [her] to accept him back" (9). Jevwe does all she can to ensure his comfort, but also determinedly asserts her individuality and freedom by not limiting herself but living life as she pleases and doing the things that make her happy. Mukoro, however, becomes totally dependent on Jevwe to survive from day to day.

People who notice Jevwe's new-found independence and permissive lifestyle regard her as being responsible for her husband's predicament as a punishment for his arrogance and greed, but she is unbothered by the double standard exhibited by these gossips who had had no complaints about Mukoro's lifestyle and infidelity when he was healthy.

Jevwe's rebellion against the patriarchal domination to which Mukoro subjects her is successful. Her radical strategy manifests through her subversion and renegotiation of the power dynamics in her home and marriage through the counterforce of witchcraft. This empowers her to rise above the limitations imposed on her through Mukoro's dominance and oppression to discover her personal freedom and fulfillment.

When the Widow Remarried

In this story, Nana's loses her loving husband, Madidi, in a motor accident. Acknowledged as a virtuous woman, people understood her grief for a husband who had been the centre of her world and on whom she had been totally dependent. As the narrator reveals, "Then Nana was not anxious about her basic needs, which she knew very well would be met without difficulty. She also took for granted her children's needs. She slept deeply" (30). Now, she must cater for herself and her children all by herself having been deserted even by her own friends.

When Omatie, a colleague of her late husband and Chief lecturer at the polytechnic comes into her life, Nana gradually warms up to him and eventually moves in with him with her two children. In so doing, she breaks with tradition by disregarding the code of conduct which requires a woman, a widow for that matter, to be virtuous and more circumspect in her conduct. Nana, thus, asserts her individualism and, in the process, places her good name and self-respect at risk by taking control of her destiny to find happiness and self-fulfillment.

However, Omatie's past experiences with women result in trust issues which affect his attitude towards Nana whom he treats like a stranger through his unexplainable silence, as well as emotional and physical neglect. To counter his rejection, Nana first applies all her womanly wiles - she dresses beautifully and sexily and cooks him delicious meals all to no avail. Nana realizes that she must apply more stringent measures to enable her take control of the situation or risk losing him altogether.

Nana devises a strategy to achieve her aim, having "...thought of what to do to give peace to her children and herself. After all, they been happy in their house before Omatie asked her to move to his ..." (38). When he notices her preparations towards her journey and questions her, she informs him about her decision to travel to Abuja and, possibly, Lagos, for a week. She asserts: "Don't worry. I will come back here. There's nothing I can't do if I want to when you are around. After all, you are out all day and we don't talk to each other anyway" (39). She travels without his permission having regained control over her life and choices through self-assertion.

Nana's strategy, which is to assert her independence and individual will by leaving Omatie's home with her children, is a drastic action which gives her the personal space she needs to ponder over their relationship and come to a decision without any distraction. The physical journey from Barkin Ladi to Abuja which creates a distance between them is also significant because it is a quest for individuality and emotional healing. It also restores her personal identity and creates room for a reawakening and self-discovery.

Ironically, it is Omatie who is reawakened to the fact that he might lose Nana and, therefore, reconnects with her through phone calls and text messages which profess his love for her and, eventually, win her back: "... the phone calls and text messages had started to have an effect on her. Love flourishes on reciprocity, she told herself. She had to meet Omatie half-way in his apparent change of heart" (40). She returns to him and their relationship is restored and eventually results in marriage.

Nana's strategies prove to be successful. Her radical stance manifests in two ways in this story; firstly, moving in with Omatie despite traditional and societal expectations and, secondly, leaving Omatie when his mistrust and silence become obstacles to the attainment of her personal fulfillment and that of her children. These two actions lead Nana to eventually discover the love and happiness she seeks in a relationship in which her individuality and dignity will not be taken for granted.

The Feminist"

In "The Feminist," Laka Dezi, the protagonist, is a modern woman, an intellectual, and a feminist activist who fights various forms of patriarchal oppression faced by women while advocating consciousness raising as an avenue through which women can be uplifted, and for social change. Laka is an embodiment of the contemporary female protagonist whom G. I. Achufusi describes as being able to "express dissatisfaction with their position or for whom wifehood and motherhood are no longer the only and absolutely single way of self-actualization ..." (160). Feminism and consciousness raising have resulted in a change in Laka's perception, not only of self, but also of societal attitudes to women and their roles in society, and the way she responds to them. According to Constance L. Mui and Julien S. Murphy, "feminism enables women to become more aware of and to evaluate their everyday experiences and concerns such as those related issues of family, work, personal identity, speech and choice and to perceive them in new and different ways that break with tradition" (3). This is an apt perception of feminism which is substantiated through Laka's actions and experiences in the story. T. Akachi Ezeigbo makes the following significant observation about feminism and feminists:

Feminism and the activities of feminists ... have given many women self-confidence and self-respect. Many more have gained the ability to solve problems and the courage to speak out. Some have developed leadership qualities which were hitherto latent. (3).

Ezeigbo's observation is reminiscent of Laka and her feminist ideals. Although she is petite, Laka is athletic, confident and "... very comfortable with her stature" (71). She also has the attributes of "a saviour, a modern-day heroine ... [and] a female knight protecting women" (71). Laka is bold, courageous and very outspoken. She is never afraid to speak out or intervene when she encounters any form of women's abuse. The narrator further reveals the following about her:

She had over the years acquired the reputation of a no-nonsense woman. She always came to the rescue of those women whose husbands or fathers thought they had slaves or servants who could be treated like chattel ... she had embarked on a crusade against men who mistreat women or believed they were superior to women. (72)

For championing the cause of women, Laka is regarded as a hero who also takes up issues such as female circumcision, and harmful widowhood practices that dehumanize women. One of Laka's objectives is to ensure that policies are put in place that effectively prosecute men who take advantage of their supposed superiority and power to subject their women to various forms of cruelty and violence. She also assembles a team of feminist lawyers who are sympathetic to the cause of women, to protect the rights of helpless and vulnerable widows and divorcees "afraid of being short-changed in property and inheritance matters" (72).

In keeping with her feminist principles, Laka insists on retaining her maiden name although she is lawfully married. This she does to preserve her individual identity,

noting that “if men did not take women's names after marriage, why should women take men's names?” (73). The rationale behind this deliberate flouting of tradition is explained by Ezeigbo thus: “...there is nothing that identifies a person better than his/her name. Take away her name and a woman becomes an appendage and a non-person” (22). Laka's action is therefore an indictment of patriarchal norms which designate the husband as the authority in marriage, while the wife's identity is completely subsumed under his. By the singular action of not taking her husband's name, Laka advocates equal partnership and individuality in the union of marriage.

In her poetry presentation at an artists' conference, Laka identifies what she defines as the source of men's power - their groins! For her, the groin is a symbol of men's power over women for it is the ultimate source of genderization facilitated by patriarchy. She references an incident where she deliberately kicks a man, who constantly assaults his wife despite their differences in size, in the groin. This symbolic action on her part does not only subject him to a feel of the pain his wife experiences each time he assaults her, it also shatters his male ego. The implication here is that, being physically stronger, men may be able to intimidate, subdue and overpower women physically. However, women can overcome this disadvantage by developing self-confidence and being assertive. It is Laka's confidence and assertiveness that has earned her the label of being “...one of those few women whose orders must be obeyed by men even if they were generals...” (77).

Women's silence and passivity grant men more power over them. Thus, “a strong moral presence” and a “strong booming voice” enable Laka to rise above her small stature to achieve her aims. For her, if they can, women must give men a taste of their own medicine: “Whenever a woman can beat a man, let her do it ... not just beat him, but do so mercilessly” (75). This strategy may sound reckless and extreme, but it drives home the point that being the husband and being stronger, does not give any man the rights to subject his wife to any form of abuse. It also enables men to directly experience the consequences of their actions which may stop the physical abuse of women.

Laka also rejects the double standards in society that provide men and women with different sets of rules due to gender differences. For her, it is “... her right to do what men did with impunity” (76). She advocates equal rights for men and women because women have as much right to do what men did without being castigated for it. For example, she firmly believes she is entitled to the same gratification men derive from sex, if not more, contrary to the traditional perception that the woman must always put the man's gratification before hers, especially in marriage. She also believes in drinking what she pleases, such as red wine, and flirting if she so desires.

During her brief contact with Nuva, whom she propositions at the conference, we learn a little more about Laka and her feminist stance: a woman does not need a man for sexual gratification; she is also equipped to handle this through self-pleasuring. Clearly, Laka is against any traditional values that permit men rights and privileges which are denied women in the African society. For her, women assert their rights to those privileges without any fear.

Laka strongly believes that women have, available to them the means to overcome their subjugation and claim their rights; all they need to do is “find their weapons” and the courage to use them effectively. In the following extract, she gives examples of some of the strategies through which women can fight men's intimidation:

They have their weapon and we also have ours, which is even more potent ... She exhaled clouds of smoke and even blew fumes into men's faces if they stared at her or stood too close. She guarded her space by any means possible and responded robustly to any violation of what she considered her sovereignty. (76)

Having realized the shortcomings on the part of women that keep them in a state of subordination to men (such as silence, passivity, timidity, and lack of awareness), one of Laka's objectives is to help women discover the weapons they can use to overcome their subordination through consciousness raising. Through consciousness raising, she enlightens them to overcome the barriers that stand between them and their freedom. However, she also recognizes that to succeed, she must counter the socialization process which conditions the girl-child to accept patriarchal norms and values that reinforce her subjugation at an early stage of her development.

It is for this reason that she uses her poetry workshop as an opportunity to visit a girl's secondary school to raise awareness of the plight of women in the African society and to equip the students with tools they can use to survive in the patriarchal African society. A significant tool in her arsenal is writing through which the students can “imbibe the radical philosophy of literature” (76-77) and use it to their advantage. Through writing, the students can strategize, express and assert themselves in the fight against patriarchal oppression. They can also use their writing as a potent tool to raise awareness and breakdown those patriarchal structures that devalue women and serve as obstacles to their upliftment.

Conclusion

Patriarchal oppression which is rife in the African society has led to the subordination, marginalization and unfulfillment of many women. For Mui and Murphy, patriarchy has empowered men to create “external barriers to women's freedom by setting up restrictive laws, customs, and social rules [which have shaped]... women's self-definition ..., preferences, and desires, [and created] an internal barrier, as it were, to [their] freedom” (7). This is evident in the selected stories whose protagonists, Jevwe, Nana and Laka devise strategies to overcome these barriers for their personal actualization and fulfilment.

Jevwe counters her husband, Mukoro's oppression, with a powerful force - witchcraft - which subverts the power dynamics in her marriage and home by inflicting her husband with a stroke which leaves him paralyzed. Jevwe thus gains control over the husband and her life. The subsequent role reversal in her home empowers her to enjoy individual freedom and fulfilment.

Nana also takes her destiny into her hands by flouting tradition to live with Omatie after her husband's marriage. When he subjects her to emotional abuse, she asserts her independence by leaving him. The distance between them allows her a personal space in which she recovers, regains her personal identity and rediscovers her individuality. This strategy paves the way for her reconciliation with Omatie and their marriage.

Laka represents women intellectuals who are not only articulate but capable of critically analyzing the factors responsible for the subordination of women in the patriarchal African society, identify their implications for women, and to make "informed choices about the role they want to adopt and the positions of power from which they do not want to see themselves excluded" (Kurian 78). Based on this, she uses her intellectual abilities and her feminist values and methods such as activism, consciousness raising and self-assertion to empower herself and other women to fight patriarchal oppression.

It is significant that all three protagonists reject the double standards in society (the result of gender inequality and sexism) that constrain and subdue women. Their strategies, thus, empower them to fight the discontents that emanate from systemic oppression. Hence, all three women are depicted as confident, courageous and resourceful women who, through critical self-analysis and awareness, take their destinies into their own hands as advocated by radical feminists.

Ojaide as a writer has declared his commitment to the cause of women in the Nigerian and African society through these stories. In so doing, he embraces the feminist ideology and one of their major tasks which is to highlight and challenge the patriarchal oppression of women while advocating women's emancipation and upliftment through consciousness raising. This is significant because Ojaide is a male author. However, it is evident that he regards the upliftment of women as an integral aspect of social transformation and progress.

For Ojaide, writing (literature) is an important tool for feminist activism and consciousness raising; this is clearly highlighted through his protagonist, Laka, who holds a creative writing workshop for the same purpose. One can, therefore, conclude that Ojaide's stories are venues through which he contributes his quota to the fight for gender equality and women's actualization in the African society.

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