

Poetry as an inquiry into the status of women

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ABSTRACT: *The study comprises a critique of women poets selected from different parts of Africa. The poets are as follows: Gwendoline Konie, Shakuntala Hawoldar, Leila Djabali, Kristina Rungana and Ifi Amadiume. This study shows that if there is one characteristic that these poets share in common, it is their inquiry into the issue of men's superiority. In this sense, all the poems have broadly similar assumptions. But there are significant differences in the ways these poets react to patriarchy. On her own part, Konie focuses on the equality of sexes. The most remarkable feature uniting the poems of Hawoldar, Djabali, and Rungano is their conservative attitude while Amadiume adopts a radical approach to patriarchy.*

Introduction

This study shows the various ways African women poets have responded to the issue of male superiority. The poems of study are selected from the Heinemann Book of *African Women's Poetry* edited by Stella and Frank Chipasula. The study focuses on the poems of Gwendoline C. Konie, a Central African poet; Ifi Amadiume from West Africa; Shakuntala Hawoldar from East Africa; Leila Djabali, a poet, from North Africa; and Kristina Rungano from Southern Africa. Konie was once Zambia's ambassador to the United Nations. She publishes and edits *Woman's Exclusive*, the country's first ever magazine devoted mainly to women's issues. Another female poet, Amadiume, is from Nigeria and was a runner up for the Commonwealth-British poetry prize for 1986. She has also published *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*. Hawoldar was born in Bombay, India. She migrated to Mauritius and married a Mauritian. Hawoldar is the author of *I've Seen Strange Things* and *Moods, Moments and Memories*. The North African poet, Djabali, was among those imprisoned by the French colonial authorities for her participation in the Algerian liberation struggle. Djabali's poems have appeared in many anthologies. Rungano hails from Zimbabwe and has published poems in various anthologies.

African Women's Poetry, abbreviated subsequently as (AWP) comprises a broad selection of poems by women all over the African continent. For the purpose of this study, we shall be looking at the poetry of five (5) women poets from different parts of the continent.

Theoretical Background: The Concept of Patriarchy

Laurel Richardson Walum has looked at patriarchy from two major perspectives. The first is the bio-genetic theory while the second one is bio- cultural. According to the renowned sociologist:

The biogenetic explanation is based on the idea that, because male dominance is culturally universal, it must be genetically caused and it must play a major role in the survival of the human species. Males and females, the proponents argue, are physically and hormonally different. Males have a higher level of androgens, the “aggressivity” hormone, whereas females have a monthly hormonal cycle. (141)

It is believed that because of the hormonal difference, men are taller and heavier than women. Besides, their skeletal structure and muscle are adapted to doing tasks that require great energy. Walum seems to be of the opinion that the anatomical and hormonal systems of women are not suitable for energetic tasks, but rather for performing biological roles such as childbearing and lactation. It is because of these biological factors that women are seen as domestic workers in years gone by.

The other explanation for patriarchal dominion is bio-culturally based. Walum explains thus:

In hunting and gathering societies, meat (protein) is scarce, and men have a monopoly on hunting and fishing. However, contrary to common opinion, men are hunters not because they are physically stronger or more agile... it is primarily because hunting and carrying burdens are incompatible activities. Women are not only carrying fetuses in utero, upsetting balance in latter month, but they carry nursing infants... (142)

An alternative explanation for patriarchy is bio-cultural; emphasising that male dominance exists because they have more access to the distribution of scarce goods and services. Women are usually playing the role of childbearing and childrearing. As a result, they do not have enough time to engage in other activities. Furthermore, because these primitive societies are governed by a “generosity” norm, the meat and other scarce resources are divided by men. The male sex is thus seen as the provider, he has greater control over meat distribution and he is seen as the stronger sex.

Lynne B. Iglitzin looks at the issue of patriarchy from a religious angle:

Patriarchal ism is evident through the old Testament, beginning with the moral imperfections and weak virtue attributed to Eve. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religions share the view that woman was solely

responsible for the fall of man... women, sex, and sin are interconnected in religious teachings. (13)

Viewed against this background, women are seen as inferior to men. Men are portrayed as the superior gender because Adam is seen as an epitome of purity before the creation of Eve. The biblical story shows that Eve is responsible for the fall of Adam, and even the fall of the entire Eden.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that the concept of patriarchy cuts across bio-genetic, bio-cultural, and religious perspectives. These concepts emphasise the innate superiority of the male-folk. Virtuous qualities are said to reside in the male personality, while women are associated with vices. A thorough examination of the bio-genetic and bio-cultural theories underscores the issue of masculinity. They show more than ever before the perception of a woman as the weaker sex.

In this connection, the purpose of this study is to show the various responses of female poets to the supposed superiority of men. A close study of *African Women's Poetry* reveals that these poets react differently to patriarchy.

Although they have all suffered from patriarchal practices, they differ in their responses to it. A study of women's poetry reveals their egalitarian, conservative and radical responses to the idea of men's superiority.

Egalitarianism

One of the ways in which African female poets have responded to the issue of patriarchy is by insisting on the absolute equality of men and women notwithstanding biological differences. One such poem is entitled "We Are Equals" and it is written by Konie, a Zambian poet. The poem begins:

Brother, I will not howl challenges
Like a female Goliath drunk on anger;
But like a noble hen eagle,
snapping the chains that bind me
I will spread my wings wide
And gracefully soar to the sky. (A WP157)

The "female" speaker addresses an imaginary "Brother", telling him that his behaviour has really made her angry. The "I" of the poem is both representing the speaker and the entire womenfolk. Although it is not explicitly stated, the speaker's "anger" arises out of the prevalence of gender inequality in society. Little wonder, then, that the female speaker is challenging the assumption of the natural

superiority of men. In the opening lines of this poem, she is quick to point out the futility of taking up arms against men. In this case, she would not like to be seen as a “female Goliath”. One source of pleasure in the poem is Konie's evident delight in the use of biblical allusion. There is a reference to the downfall of Goliath as recorded in (*New Jerusalem Bible* I Sam. 14:10-20). Through biblical allusion, the poet underscores the futility of a violent protest.

In this regard, the poem is chiefly not concerned with violence. The poet is protesting against assigning lower value to the female folk and treating them as second class human beings. The female voice is interested in the removal of all forms of inequality through the creation of a more egalitarian system. Konie insists that women are now to be on equal footing with men and she does this through the use of bird imagery. The bird is said to be “snapping the chains” of inequality. Here the “chains” are metaphoric references to the laws and cultural norms that limit the education, income, and job opportunities for women. The speaker believes that there are no inherent emotional, intellectual, physical and psychological differences between men and women. As a result, she is no longer prepared to give priority to men or see herself through men's eyes; she wants to be set free like the bird in the poem. The female speaker tries to construct a vision of an egalitarian society by referring to the world of birds. In this world, there is no gender inequality and all the birds are seen flying freely. She wishes to be like a bird that flies with dignity.

Part of the poet's success is due in large measure to the way in which she uses bird imagery to illustrate her vision of a gender free society. Besides, it would be important to comment on the word “snapping” as it appears in the context of the poem. It serves two purposes. Firstly, it shows the speaker's awareness that gender discrimination is all about socially-imposed values. Secondly, it shows the struggle of liberation of women folk from every stranglehold of the patriarchal society. Deep down in the speaker's mind is the burning desire to get to where men are and operate at par with them:

I will shower you with dazzling light...
and bum the scales that blind your eyes as you bask in my
warmth below me,
that you may see me as a human, a whole,
not a body to quench your appetites. (*A WP157*)

The speaker's intention to show men the “light” is no doubt a reaction to patriarchy. Konie attests to the fact that man has subjugated

woman to his whim and caprices; he has used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to attend to his sexual pleasures. According to the speaker, it is misleading and unjust to identify women exclusively as sex objects and nothing else.

Konie's protest against male superiority is more vividly spelt out as follows:

On earth once again,
I will nurture you...
Fixed by my eyeballs, your eyes will soften
and slowly melt with understanding and flow into mine as mine
flow into yours
our shoulders touching, merging in parity. (*AWP157*)

Konie is protesting against patriarchal norms. She goes against the practice whereby the lives of women are socially defined as revolving around, supporting and gaining their significance from the male folk. The issue of equality between the sexes forms the basis of this poem. The speaker of Konie's poem sees the social values which distinguish man from woman (on the basis of psychological features and social functions) as a system of sexrole stereotyping. It is implied that the socially unequal position of women throughout history is not because of biology, but rather the result of social values. She holds sex-role differentiation as discriminatory and oppressive.

In this poem, Konie canvasses equality of opportunities for both men and women; this seems the point of the whole poem as the speaker wishes an eyeball-to-eyeball relationship between men and women. Similarly, the female speaker wishes to stand shoulder to shoulder with men. This is suggestive of the fact that all persons should be given equal opportunities, and civil rights should be extended to all. Above all, the poet's use of the word "parity" is both an indication of economy of diction and at the same time a direct expression of emotion.

Conservatism

One predominant feature of some female poets is their conservative approach to patriarchy. One notices the constant attempt by these poets to present the predicament of women without offering any alternative solution. This fact speaks for itself in the poems of Shakuntala Hawoldar, a poet from Zimbabwe. One such poem is entitled "The Woman" and it begins as follows:

What you love in me
Is a woman
who invites you to discover

The vast continent within her. (*AWP134*)

It is obvious from the above lines that men's interest in women is purely sexual. Particularly worthy of note is the tone of self-pity. The poet sees herself as the mouthpiece of the entire womenfolk who are treated as sex objects. To leave no one in doubt about the female predicament, the poet informs her readers that women are considered only for their sexual attraction and not for their personality or their intelligence. It is disheartening that men are interested in discovering the "vast continent" within women. In order to emphasise the idea of women as mere sex objects, the poet resorts to geographical imagery. Through this, one captures a mental picture of a group of people travelling to a particular place for a specific purpose. In the context of the poem, this image drawn from geography is used to demonstrate men's exploration of the female organ. This image shows that the female is disadvantaged by the fact of her gender as her role is confined to giving men sexual pleasure. One result of the poet's approach to patriarchy is to create a speaker who laments the female condition. The conception of African marriage which centres on procreation and rearing of children receives attention here. Ikechukwu Nwakaeze-Ogugua commenting on African marriage says:

In Africa, a woman is not considered as being a complete person without being identified in her role as wife and relation as mother. She is complete then when she has shown herself fertile and productive, that is when she serves as a door to occasion immortality of her husband and husband's people. (1038)

The reader of this poem is reminded that women are the "carrier of wombs" for men. The poet depicts the woman's situation within traditional and contemporary settings, especially her role as wife and mother. She exposes the importance attached to having children and thereby implies the miserable lot of barren women. Read from this particular perspective, one cannot but draw the inescapable conclusion that women are the oppressed sex. One peculiar feature of this poem is the fatalist attitude of the poet towards patriarchy. The speaker accepts that women's identity comes through their relationship with men; she is first a wife and then a mother.

In another poem entitled "You Have Touched My Skin", Hawoldar continues to lament the unjust treatment of women by the malefolk. It begins thus:

You have touched my skin
without entering my pores
Do you know the sores inside
Festering in the dark womb of my mind? (*AWP137*)

The speaker is feeling embittered because men do not show concern about the general health, happiness and safety of women. She thinks very strongly that their relationship with women is driven by pure lust. The significant point being made is that women are important primarily as sex objects. What is to be noticed is that the poet conveys this to us metaphorically. It is through biological imagery that the reader is told that men are not interested in the emotional, physical, and psychological well-being of women. According to the speaker, men have always “touched” women's “skin” without getting to their “pores”. The biological reference is meant to express the fact that men always show a somewhat superficial relationship to women. A general examination of the poem reveals that the poet is mainly interested in depicting the oppression of women:

But you have been content
To know me as an image,
Sometimes as a caricature...
You have known me
As your morning cup of tea. (*AWP 137*)

Here the poet seeks to expose the plight of women, who as it were, are struggling to co-exist in a man's world where they are regarded as appendages. In other words, Hawoldar tries to show the impact of sexism or sexist oppression on the lives of women in African society. She is unhappy with the situation where women are unfairly caricatured as the second sex. Halwodar displays a conservative approach towards the issue of patriarchy. She is not optimistic that there can be important changes in the social, political and economic lives of women. Little wonder, then, that her poems are just to show to the reader that women are suffering from sexist tyranny.

The Algerian poet, Leila Djabali, can be seen as another conservative female poet. One poem of hers which is entitled “For My Torturer, Lieutenant D...” falls into this category. It begins with the following lines:

You slapped me
no one had ever slapped me
and then your fist
and your filthy language. (*AWP 4*).

Djabali's poem is dramatic and recreates a sad story of how a woman is oppressed, repressed, and ultimately beaten up, specifically by her husband, but more generally by the violence of patriarchy. The

speaker discloses the fact that a woman has often been the oppressed sex, and man establishes his control by his superior physical strength. The opening lines of this poem represent the all-pervasive power of the male sex. By giving the woman a slap on her face, the man's action is encouraging husband-to-wife violence. Furthermore, it is a reflection of the hierarchical and male-dominant type of society which characterizes the African world. Commenting generally on patriarchal violence, Denise Paulme says thus:

African marriage systems have often been condemned on the grounds that they debase women; the submissive attitude a wife must adopt towards her husband; the generally acknowledged right of a man to beat his wife... (4)

It is easy to understand why the male character inflicts physical assault on the female. Paulme's observation on African marriage system offers a convincing proof that the society sees nothing wrong in a husband beating up his wife. Apart from physical violence, the man also uses verbal abuse. There is sadness about the whole poem. This is because the speaker reveals that her husband is fond of using "filthy language" on her. By insulting the speaker, the male character seeks to prove his superior status.

The poem is effective in its precision, summarizing the predicament of women:

I bled too much to be able to blush
All night long...
rainbows before my eyes
It was as if I were eating my mouth
drowning my eyes. (*AWP* 4)

Everything in the poem is channeled towards family violence. It exposes the problem of battered women and shows that brutal husbands exist at many levels of society. One must point out that the poem is merely a complaint about marital violence. It does not go beyond a formal complaint about patriarchy. More importantly, the poem ends on a conservative note that violence is part of the patriarchal order; women are to be treated as the men consider appropriate.

Another African woman poet that is conservative in her approach to patriarchy is Kristina Rungano of Zimbabwe in Southern Africa. One of her poems is entitled "The Woman" and it begins as follows:

A minute ago I came from the well
where young women like myself drew water...

Then I got home and cooked your meal...
 I washed your dishes
 And swept the room we shared
 Before I set forth to prepare your bedding. (*AWP 211-2*)

The speaker in this poem finds herself in a state of servitude. She laments here that the natural vocation of women is that of a wife and domestic servant. The setting of this poem is a typical example of the patriarchal family which conceives the woman mainly as a housewife who has certain duties to fulfill towards her home and children. The speaker's predicament in the poem confirms Macaulay Toma-Ikomi's views that the "husband is socially superior as compared with that of wife's status in African traditional marriage relationship. The African woman must serve, respect and honour her husband" (17). In the poem, Rungano presents a situation which subordinates the weaker sex to the stronger. It is noticeable that the poet concentrates on the use of imaginative details; one effect of this is to capture the atmosphere of women's oppression in vivid terms. The strength of Rungano's poem lies in the primacy it gives to women's subordinate roles. It allows us to see the day-to-day social practices through which men exercise control over women:

Yet tomorrow I shall again wake up to you...
 cook your food
 You shall again be my Lord
 For isn't right that woman should obey,
 Love, serve and honor her man? (*AWP 212*)

The speaker of Rungano's poem seems to have accepted her role as a wife and a domestic servant. This is reflected in her conservative tone. In this regard, one notes the repeated use of the word "again" in the above lines. The repetition of "again" shows that the "woman is not a forced slave but a willing - e. not a slave merely, but a favourite," to quote the words of John Stuart Mill (167).

In yet another poem entitled "Labour", Rungano reinforces the notion of women as bearers of children. Even the title of the poem itself illustrates the view that the primary function of a woman is to reproduce. Anyone who has read the poem will know that the persona is an expectant mother:

For nine months I had borne him in my womb.
 Nine months of disillusionment and pain
 Relieved only occasionally by the gentle kicking within me;
 The gentle movement of the life I created within me. (*AWP 208*)

A close study shows that Rungano has an eye for details which she weaves into the poem with great skill. Through accurate and minute details, the persona tells us about her antenatal experiences. Sometimes, she finds herself in “pain” because of the onset of uterine contractions. At times, she is relieved” because of the “gentle kicking” in her womb. In the poem, the expectant mother is happy because the process of “kicking” is an indication that her baby is healthy. What no reader can fail to observe in the poem is the repetition of nine months; it occurs in the first and second lines. The primary function of this is to emphasise the predicament of women. The centre of interest is not in the occasional joyful moments of baby movements so much as in the contractions of the uterine muscles.

From line to line, Rungano continues to lament over the gynaecological problems of women:

And now I was beginning to feel sharp pains in me
 And mama saying they are labour pains...
 Would it be a boy, she thought with intensified wonder,
 How proud his father would be
 or would it be a girl
 Someone I could teach to be just like me. (*AWP* 208)

The speaker experiences involuntary contractions of the longitudinal uterine muscles of her cervix. This intense “pain” is an indication that she will soon be delivered of a baby. But what baffles the reader is that the expectant mother is not so much interested in her safety as in the sex of her yet-to-be delivered baby. In particular, she believes that her husband will prefer a baby “boy” to a “girl”. To support this, Udo Etuk has said that in African social set-up, men prefer sons to daughters. He notes that “if for whatever reasons the woman cannot deliver sons that will be a sufficient reason... to take a second wife.” (90). It is implied that the sex of the children is determined by the wife.

The conservative nature of the poet's attitude to patriarchy is reflected in the way she presents an expectant mother who wishes to have a male child. Rungano's poem is conservative in content; it does not seek to fight patriarchy. Instead, she seems to have accepted sexist stereotypes of the supremacy of the male child.

Radicalism

A careful reading of this collection of female poetry shows that some of the poets are radical in their response to patriarchy. For instance, Ifi Amadiume, a Nigerian poet, is one of those radical female

poets. One of her poems is entitled “Bloody Masculinity” and it begins thus:

Shall I be child of the fullmoon,
a slave to love
in seasoned womanhood?
Shall I dare worship yet again
starry-eyed in the temple of love
with maidens yet unbroken? (*A WP 83*)

Amadiume's speaker is of the opinion that men have created and sustained “masculinity” by using many institutions of oppression such as marriage, family, love and sexual intercourse. She identifies the issue of “love temple” as the psychological factor in the persecution of women. The single most important belief of Amadiume's speaker is that women easily fall more in love than men. This is evident in the second line, where she sees herself as a “slave to love”. The poet is sad because men readily use this romantic quality of women as a means of oppression and exploitation.

One source of delight in the poem is Amadiume's use of a woman of mature years as her speaking voice. From her personal experience, she knows that romantic love plays a great role in maintaining male supremacy. As a result, she is calling on women, especially the young ones, not to “moon” over men anymore. Thus, the liberation of women can be achieved if they stop to “worship” men. The speaker of the poem believes that women cannot be free of patriarchal control so long as women are romantically involved with men.

She becomes even more radical as follows:

Shall I shed tears of blood
again in loving
while virgins bleed freely
new initiates in love?
will the source of my spring Again recede
at the blast of the unbending penis? (*A WP 83*)

Here the speaker sees heterosexuality as the primary institution for the oppression of women. She thinks that women's oppression will continue if women continue to surrender to the “blast” of the male organ. In the context of the poem, the word “blast” is an appeal to our auditory senses; the sound effect emphasises that the “unbending penis” is the root cause of women's subjugation. Heterosexuality makes women to define themselves through Tien. Therefore, the female voice is calling on women and “Virgins” to reject the male organ. This

rejection of “the unbending penis” is a threat to the geological, political, personal, and economic basis of patriarchy. It tends to destroy the ideology about women's innate need for men.

Amadiume's radical response to patriarchal hegemony is continued in yet another poem entitled “Mistress of My Own Being”. These are the opening lines of the poem:

Untied of all binding knots
and tears and ties of time
freed of haunting memories and regrets
feelings of contentment rush on. (*AWP 81*)

In this poem, male domination is being questioned and challenged. To even the casual reader, the “binding knots” in the first line are metaphoric references to the subordinate treatment of women. The metaphor is suggestive of the ways women have been appropriated as sex objects, as well as progenitors and producers. It also suggests the master-slave relationship between a husband and his wife. She laments that women are the ones slaving away all day trying to do all the domestic duties.

However, the speaker here wishes to be free from these “binding knots”. Not unexpectedly, she is opposed to the oppressive male/female relationships. She wants changes within households that will bring women respect, authority and security. The speaker rejects the situation where men are seen as the legitimate and divinely sanctioned leaders of households and society. Only repeated and careful reading can reveal the speaker's radical theme. This is an important aspect of Amadiume's poem. It is impossible to read poem without sensing it:

In this sweet sanctuary,
I have no need of food or man,
I feel no need for tomorrows, no need for sound or voices
only the soothing silence of the night. (*AWP 82*)

One thing likely to strike the reader is the surprising directness of the female voice. Even a casual reader can easily see that she is an advocate of separatism. According to Virginia Sapiro, this means “not just sexual separation of women from men but also a wider separation from male culture and institutions” (475). Amadiume's speaker is agitating that women should separate from men and from institutions, relationships, roles and activities which are male-defined and male-dominated. For women's position to change, the speaker states that women should no longer rely on men for “food”. She rejects the

patriarchal order in which men are seen as the bread-winners and heads of households. She also sees heterosexuality as the foundation of all oppression. Consequently, the speaker is agitating for a female world where there would be no need for a "man". This kind of female world the poet refers to as a "Sweet Sanctuary".

Conclusion

It has been seen that female poets from various parts of Africa all lament the stereotypic notions of women. This is the common denominator of the poetry of Konie, Amadiume, and Hawolder. Others are Djabali and Rungano. Their poems are tied together by the sexist predicament: women suffer under the patriarchal burden of male superiority and dominance. Men are seen as having a natural flair for domination. There can be no doubt that the treatment of women as portrayed in these poems violates the principle of equality, liberty, and justice.

What is surprising, however, is the differing responses of these poets to patriarchy. The Central African poet, Konie, favours equal rights and activities for both men and women in their economic, social, political, and private lives. This poet protests against the idea that the functional role of serving and helping in the home is best suited for the female gender. Konie's poem is critical of the status quo, advocating absolute equality of men and women.

On their own part, the female poets from East, Southern, and North Africa aim to conserve, rather than change women's position. These poets are fatalistic about the stereotypic notion that a woman is a full-time mother who stays at home, keeps the house, and cares for her children. In this regard a woman assumes the responsibility for childcare and house management. Hawolder, Djabali, and Rungano are conservatives; they seem to have accepted the constraints of women defined as wives and mothers within the family or as natural unequal beings.

Unlike these three poets, the West African poet, Amadiume, thinks it is misleading to identify women exclusively as wives and mothers and nothing else. Her poem is the boldest attempt yet to condemn patriarchy. The female speaker in Amadiume's poem is no longer prepared to see her husband as a superior person. It is a radical poem which advocates separation of women from men. Unlike the other women poets, Amadiume's poems are revolutionary in nature and they seek to fight patriarchy by rejecting heterosexuality.

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