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Gender and Transformations: Female Activism in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

ABSTRACT. There are some gender expectations and roles that are traditionally assigned to the woman which are both psychologically excruciating and potentially limiting. Many times, gender issues centre around male and female experiences; and the rationale behind feminist writings is to correct negative conceptions raised by male writers about women, and how women can recreate their world and rightly manage their social space. Over time in history, women have maintained that the decisions which men make, often have far-reaching consequences on them; to this end, they have chosen to get involved, questioning their roles, negotiating more roles, taking on greater responsibilities and are exploring newer approaches to addressing social problems. The study seeks to unravel some transformational endeavours of women in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*. Through an analysis of samples of related reviews on gender writings, the paper explores practical strategies of women to seek redress and as such transition from the precarious margin of social experience to the centre. Drawing from nego-feminism theoretical framework, an African feminism strand developed by Obioma Nnaemeka, which consist chiefly in negotiation, balance, compromise, and complementarity; the analysis examines how women have negotiated their roles in their bid to make significant social changes and transformations. The article finds out that gender politics is graphically etched and dramatised in many African literary texts, but the form portrayed in Ojaide's *The Activist*, is therapeutic, palliative and nurturing. It concludes by identifying gender stereotyping as a key impediment to gender and transformations.

KEYWORDS: transformations, roles, negotiation, input, nation-building.

Introduction: Gender and Transformations

In the past, the words, "sex" and "gender" were employed interchangeably. However, many psychologists who were influenced by the ideas of Rhoda Unger (1979), have adopted a more precise definition of the two terms. *Sex*, was used to refer to person's biological maleness or female-

ness; while *Gender*, refers to the non-physiological aspects of being female or male—the cultural expectations for femininity and masculinity. This distinction is significant because it focuses on the fact that many female-male differences in behaviour or experience, do not spring naturally or automatically from biological differences between the sexes (Lips, p. 5).

Gender, according to the World Health Organisation, refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviour and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other (p. 1). As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.

Gender is hierarchical and produces inequalities that intersect with other social and economic inequalities. Gender-based discrimination intersects with other factors of discrimination, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographic location, gender identity and sexual orientation, among others. This is referred to as intersectionality. Gender interacts with, but is different from sex, because it (gender) refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs (WHO “Gender and Health”, p. 2). Gender and sex are related to, but different from gender identity. Gender identity refers to a person’s deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person’s physiology or designated sex at birth.

Gender inequality and discrimination faced by women and girls puts their health and well-being at risk. Women and girls often face greater barriers than men and boys to accessing health information and services. These barriers include restrictions on mobility; lack of access to decision-making power. In some parts of the world, the bias against manifests in varying forms of depictions and imagery. The female gender is often depicted as passive, emotionally unstable, psychologically infantile, masochistic, penis-envying, which many female writers have criticized and rejected. But through many women advocacy organisations, policies, awareness groups, programme and activities, some of the matrixes of male domination and the objectification of women are brought to the fore, and the platform upon which women can challenge and correct such cultural prejudices established by society against them has also been created. For many female writers whose pen has continuously been used to dismantle patriarchal “forces” against women, the woman, in reality, is not “the weaker sex,” but “the weakened sex”. Thus, inherently in the woman

is the will power and capacity to do more, become more and transform society beyond the imagination of their male counterparts. It is against this backdrop that this article, "Gender and Transformations..." is so named. By "transformations", we refer to a marked change in form, nature or appearance; it is an extreme radical change. Patriarchy gave rise to feminism, and feminism is a consciousness raising theory, where women strive to enlighten fellow women on the need to look inwards, look beyond their confinement and expand their world in spite of their femininity.

Transformation is a process which liberates the woman from unhealthy and oppressive gender straightjackets. Transformation processes help the woman find her true self, empower herself as well as heal herself and her relationship. Transformation is simply the journey of the woman towards self-recovery and self-redefinition.

In his introduction to chapter eight entitled, "Feminism", Charles E. Bressler, recounted Judith Viorst's 1972 version of the fairy tale, *Cinderella*. In that version, Viorst presented to her audience a re-created, transformed and new Cinderella:

The new Cinderella now has opinion of her own [...] Asserting her own independence. The new Cinderella refuses to be shaped by her society. The new Cinderella refuses to be defined as the nonsignificant other. Unlike the old Cinderella, she will not allow herself to be shaped by her society (p. 179).

As it is evident, the recreated Cinderella debunks the false standards and ideas concerning women and their portrayal in life. Hence, we can lucidly say that transformation liberates not just the hands and feet of the woman, but the mind also, and inspires the woman against remaining as a dependent creature who blindly accepts the commandments of her patriarchal society. They must reject the idea that women are mindless, weepy, helpless creatures who must wait for a man to come and make their lives meaningful.

The idea of "transformation" in the context of this article was aptly captured by Blessing Diala-Ogamba:

[...] with the earlier male writers, women were relegated to the background in most African societies so that patriarchy can maintain authority. However, with education, persistence, consistent, hard work and collaboration, women have attended higher status to gain freedom and operate on the same level with their husbands and men in general. All these successes are not easy to

come by, but with diligence, women continue to exploit different strategies to liberate themselves and revalue their positions as effectual and contributing members of the society (p. 149).

The contemporary African novel has featured women with extreme capacity for change and new ideas. Women, working with men have created progress and better functioning societies. These women have demonstrated cohesion, collaboration, consensus and complementarity in their spirited efforts at building a better society.

Theoretical Framework: Nego-feminism

Nnaemeka (2004) coins the term nego-feminism to speak to the tensions and aspirations of African feminisms. She speaks of this as the feminism of compromise, contending with the multiple aspects of patriarchy on the continent and dealing with this in an African-specific way:

First nego-feminism is the feminism of negotiation; second nego-feminism stands for “no ego” feminism. In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance. African feminism[s] (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines (p. 22).

Thus, nego-feminism is a guide for dealing with the feminist struggles that occur on the continent; it considers the implications of patriarchal traditions and customs and aims to dismantle and negotiate around these. Nego-feminism also hopes to detach personal gain and pride from the overall goal of achieving equity for women—thus ‘no ego’. This is not always the case, as with all ideological constructs, the practice of nego-feminism on the ground is subject to emotionality, personal goals and even ego. However, aspirations for a more complete form of nego-feminism remain a noteworthy goal.

Tanure Ojaide’s Short Profile

Tanure Ojaide was born in Delta State, an oil-rich but economically impoverished part of Niger Delta region of Nigeria. He attended a Catholic

Grammar School and Federal Government College, Warri. Ojaide was educated at the University of Ibadan, where he received a bachelor's degree in English, and Syracuse University, where he received both the M.A. in Creative Writing and Ph.D. in English. Ojaide is a Fellow in Writing of the University of Iowa; his poetry awards include the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the Africa Region (1987) amongst many other local and international awards.

Ojaide is currently the Frank Porter Graham Professor of Africana Studies at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He received a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship (1999/2000) to collect and study the "Udje Dance Songs of Nigeria's Urhobo People." He has twice received the Fulbright fellowship (2002/03 and 2013/14), and the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship (2016). He has read from his poetry in Britain, Harbourfront (Canada), International Poetry Festival, Medellin (Colombia, 2013).

His poetry collections include, but not limited to *The Fate of Vultures* (1990), *The Blood of Peace* (1991), *The Tale of the Harmattan* (2007), *Waiting for the Hatching of a Cockerel* (2008), *The Beauty I Have Seen* (2010), *Songs of Myself: Quartet* (2015), and *The Questioner: New Poems* (2018). Some of his novels are *Sovereign Body* (2004), *The Activist* (2006) and *Matters of the Moment* (2011).

In *The Activist*, Nigeria's acclaimed poet, Tanure Ojaide, brings his sharp sensibilities and writing skills to prose storytelling. The protagonist makes a reverse trip from America to a home whose young and able are straining at the leash to escape to the perceived comforts of the West. Ojaide weaves a compelling narrative that illuminates the contradictions of state and society in contemporary Africa. In his estimation of Ojaide's novel, *The Activist*, Chidi Maduka hinted that "...the novel uses an intellectual hero and a female activist to underscore the gravity of the social injustices meted out to the oil-producing communities, and to point out that these injustices have to be put to an end through the activities of the revolutionaries from the region" (p. 80).

Gender Transformation Platforms

Gender transformation platforms are programs and interventions that create opportunities for individuals to actively challenge gender norms, promote positions of social and political influence for women in commu-

nities, and address power inequities between persons of different genders (Social and Behaviour Change, p. 1). Gender transformation platforms create an enabling environment for gender transformation by going beyond just including women as participants. Gender transformation platforms are part of a continuum of gender integration, or the integration of gender issues into all aspects of program and policy conceptualization, development, implementation and evaluation.

Gender transformation platforms can serve to address multi-leveled power hierarchies in communities that impede an individual's ability, particular the woman's ability to make decisions about his/her health. For women, this can include (but is not limited to) health decisions such as access to health services, condom use, partner reduction, and birth spacing. These approaches strive to shift gendered community perspectives and social relationships towards perspectives of equality that allow both women and men to achieve their full potential within a society. Research has shown that when women are empowered—whether socially or economically, they become transformed, and can take on stronger and higher roles and responsibilities, not just for the economic wellbeing of their families, but for nation building.

What we find in Tanure Ojaide's fiction, *The Activist*, is a group of transformed women, who are poised to correct the narrative of their community. Ably led by two female characters—Mrs. Timi Taylor and Ebi—the wife of the Activist, women of several occupations ranging from “women farmers, fishers, traders, priestesses, chiefs, lawyers, lecturers, doctors were mobilized for communal interests (*The Activist*, p. 237), under the umbrella name Women of the Delta Forum (WODEFOR). Their objectives include, but not limited to: “...seek permanent peace” in the area following rising spate of violence and the wanton destruction of lives and property fueled by oil-politics in the region.

Female Activism in Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist*

The Encarta Dictionary puts the word, “activism” as “vigorous and sometimes aggressive action in pursuing a political or social end (n.p.). Some of its associated synonyms are direct action, political action, social action, involvement, engagement, crusading, politicking, to name some. Of the aforementioned synonyms, engagement, crusading and social action are manifest forms of activism in Ojaide's *The Activist*.

Female activism had not been one of such front burner issues in African women writings; what has occupied the literary and critical landscape of many African female writers and critics are such issues as self-realization, self-actualization, self-discovery, resistance against male domination, as seen in the works of writers like Flora Nwapa, Zaynab Alkali, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Amma Darko, and others. Although, there were attempts on women struggles, but female activism as we find in Ojaide's *The Activist* was not a common approach in many foundational African female writers' texts. Ojaide's style of female activism or crusading, manifests in the form of a movement of women with a sense of extreme solidarity aimed at achieving a common objective. Through the actions of such characters like Mrs. Timi Taylor and Ebi—the wife of the Activist, women of several occupations ranging from “women farmers, fishers, traders, priestesses, chiefs, lawyers, lecturers, doctors were mobilized for communal interests (*The Activist*, p. 237), under the umbrella name, Women of the Delta Forum (WODEFOR). Their objectives include, but not limited to: “...seek permanent peace” in the area following rising spate of violence and the wanton destruction of lives and property fueled by oil-politics in the region. In their deliberations, they identified “a litany of woes that the Niger Delta women were suffering from” (*The Activist*, p. 240).

Female activism in Ojaide's *The Activist*, can pass for social action. It was a gathering of women to explore answers to the enormous environmental ruin meted on their ecosystem. It was an attempt to bring about peace after many senseless ethnic crises involving three ethnic groups—Urhobo, Izon and the Itsekiri in the Warri axis of the Niger Delta region. Initiated by Mrs. Timi Taylor and assisted by Mrs. Ebi—the wife of the Activist (the story's protagonist); these two women mobilized hundreds of other women to speak up against the continued damage of their airspace, farmlands and rivers, wrought by oil multinationals' activities.

In their deliberations, the Mrs. Timi-led women group, who were later christened Women of the Niger Delta Forum (WODEFOR) made some striking demands on the oil multinationals and the federal military government as contained in their communique:

- Devise and adopt means of making the environment safe from pollution and attract real development.
- Demand clean and healthy water supply from the oil prospecting corporations operating in the region
- Pay attention to the health needs of the people through the provision of well-equipped health facilities.

- Remediation or repairs of some environmental damages.
- Recruitment of women into oil corporations.

The women further resolved that they would seriously engage across these three leadership in the Niger Delta State: the leadership of the oil corporations, the military government; however, if these talks failed, they unanimously agreed:

If the talks with the oil company and the military government failed, they would look for unconventional ways to compel them to act. They would start with persuasion but if that failed, they would have to confront those ruining them and their environment with the power they possessed. Bell Oil Company and the Federal Military Government might be mountains, but the women knew they had precedents in their customs of defeating tyrants. What would compel the oil company and the military government to act remained a secret they would keep till they wielded the weapon (*The Activist*, p. 244).

Basically, the thought and resolve to pursue the above agenda by these women, substantiated the veracity of the assumption that the woman is existentially not a *weaker sex*, but the *weakened sex*. The woman's silence, more often, is simply an orchestration of patriarchy to keep her as the "other". This resonates with Simon De Beauvoir observation in her book, *The Second Sex*:

To say that woman is mystery is to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not understood; she is there, but hidden behind veils; she exists beyond those uncertain appearances (as cited in *The Norton*, p. 1410).

In defining the woman exclusively as the "other", the man is effectively denying her humanity. Having stated this, De Beauvoir therefore concluded that "...an existent is nothing other than what he or she does." (as cited in *The Norton*, p. 1410). Whether male or female, the roles, and outcome should be the core determinant.

This women group—WODEFOR mobilized two representatives—Mrs. Timi Taylor and Mrs. Ebi to join the delegate of the people who were to fly to the United States to attend the United Nations Conference on Oil Exploration. Their objective was to report both in letters and in photographs on the destruction meted on the land and water of the people from whose soil oil exploration is being carried out. They were to show in pictures and in words the squalor, neglect, underdevelopment and the huge marginaliza-

tion which the natives are exposed to following the insensitivity of both Bell Oil Company, other foreign oil corporations and the government of Nigeria. Sadly, the journey was aborted by the government through some immigration officers at the airport; however, these women were never deterred in their resolve to get it right for the health and wellbeing of their children and the unborn generation. As a key representative of WODEFOR and leader, the passion to deeply engage women for social action and transformation, prompted Ebi to pursue a doctorate degree after giving birth to her first child. After acquiring this terminal degree and having a child, Ebi resigned her appointment with the university in order to manage the newly-established newspaper outfit, *The Patriot* owned by her husband—The Activist. With this added assignment, Ebi expressed hope that she would have a wider platform through which the objectives of WODEFOR will be known to a larger audience:

[...] she was appointed the manager/publisher of *The Patriot*. She felt she would be in a position to better promote the interests of the Niger Delta women in such a strategic appointment. She would do a bi-weekly column, "Women Matters" together with managing the paper (*The Activist*, p. 292).

Although the newspaper is the brain child of the Activist, but Ebi made it serve as a vehicle for driving the vision and goals of WODEFOR: "The paper...showed in coloured and black-and-white photographs the damage done to the environment (*The Activist*, p. 293). With support from WODEFOR and several other Niger Delta State indigenes, the Activist contested for the position of the state governor, and won. However, prior to his election, "...he was invited to speak at the annual convention of the Niger Delta People's Association in Washington, DC...the Activist made the flight, and, as protocol required, he and Ebi flew first class on British Airways from Lagos to London and then change planes to Washington, DC (*The Activist*, p. 345).

What is known as WODEFOR, started as a reconciliatory effort initiated by Mrs. Timi Taylor following the heinous ethnic clash among the Izon, the Itsekiri and the Urhobo which left scores of people, including pregnant women and children dead. To nip this bloody crisis in the bud, Mrs. Taylor mobilized hundreds of women ranging from women farmers, fishers, traders, priestesses, chiefs, lawyers, lecturers, doctors and women of other occupations (*The Activist*, p. 237). Her primary objective was for reconciliation and peace building. However, as representatives of the individual

women group began to voice their dissatisfaction with the activities of Bell Oil Company and the complicit attitude of the government to their plight, the need to give a stronger voice to the ordeal of these women in order to mobilise support and bring about change became clearer to Mrs. Taylor. So, together with intellectuals like Mrs. Ebi, an organisation was established with the acronym, WODEFOR (Women of the Niger Delta Forum). Its line of activism or clamour for change, would begin with persuasion, but if that fails, they would switch to confrontation.

Conclusion

For decades, women have been stereotyped as “the weaker sex” due to supposed physical and even intellectual fragility—which many times, are not true; thus, limiting their incursion into more male-dominated trades or professions, such as engineering and construction. But in the last one hundred years and counting, women’s roles have changed dramatically across the world. In contemporary time, women have demonstrated remarkable shift in gender roles by their input and output across various fields of human experience. It is what we call, “gender and transformations”. Through their lived experiences, they have not only rebelled against the status quo, but are generating amazing results to counter and correct gender stereotyping.

Gender stereotypes, for instance, in the workplace manifest sometimes as fixed beliefs and assumptions people have about how men and women tend to behave. It includes which traits people believe men and women have in their professional roles? Stereotypes are often based on social norms and tend to overlook the individual female personalities, training, skills and professionalism. Owing to this, many female workers end up being treated as abstract categories rather than as professionals with marked skills.

Allowing gender stereotypes in the workplace, can be really harmful because it has the possibility of limiting a female worker’s potential and choices. Furthermore, it creates expectations and pressures that frequently result in discrimination, harassment, and lower job performance, to say little of the diminished life satisfaction. Given the opportunity and the right atmosphere, women are willing to apply themselves in a renewed and sustained efforts at making complementary inputs into society. It is on this note that this study has carefully demonstrated that women were not

the “weaker” sex, but the “weakened” sex; and are now ready to make significant inputs in nation building while maintaining peaceful co-existence with the male gender.

The persuasion approach adopted by WODEFOR, continued and was quite fruitful as Mrs. Ebi engaged both her academic and journalistic platforms to garner support for WODEFOR. She continued her campaign and support for the group with her later position as the first lady, after her husband won the governorship election in the State. Following this, the form of activism in the Ojaide's *The Activist*, is not only female-driven, but intellectual and peaceful. Ebi's new position as “the State's First Lady” (*The Activist*, p. 347), will not only signal a new milestone, but would also afford her the resources to advance the course of WODEFOR as well as position the State's women and girls for greater accomplishments. By carefully engaging the idea of negotiation and assuming a “no-ego” posture as a wife, in spite of her doctorate degree, Ebi did not only win the love and attention of her husband—the Activist, but she also enjoyed conciliation, collaboration, consensus and complementarity in her home. This is indicative of the African feminist's vision of a peaceful, wholesome and integrative society, favourable enough to foster gender symmetry, the recognition and inclusion of the female, as well as mutual respect.

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