Recurrent Themes
in the Poetry of Yorùbá Female Writers

by

Janet O. Sheba, Ph.D.
Department of African Languages and Literatures
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife

Janet O. Sheba (laidesheba@yahoo.co.uk; laisheba@oauife.edu.ng) is a member of the Department of African Languages and Literatures at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife in Nigeria.

Abstract

This paper examines and discusses themes in Yorùbá poems written by women, and contends that the poems are topical socio-political commentary that at the time of publication pre-occupied Yorùbá society and Nigeria at large. Thus discussion will feature the recurrent themes of women, men, and the state of the nation via health, morality and religion to present women as serious literary artists who reflect on what is happening in the wider society and vivisect issues on women objectively without feminine sentiments. Second, the female poets in this study have enabled us to read the minds of women on various issues affecting women and humanity as a whole as they called on women to speak out to condemned the barbaric attitudes of some men towards women, and therefore have challenged men to take a critical look at their biased opinion of women and change their attitudes for the upliftment of society.
Introduction

Toril Moi noted that as early as 1971 Elaine Showalter (as quoted by Register: 1975) called on critics to examine the works of female writers in order to have a deep knowledge of their arts (p. 50). Also, there is a need to re-enfranchise women writers into the mainstream of academic curriculum through a fairer, non-sex biased, and more judicious appraisals of their work. This is what this paper intends to achieve as it examines the themes of Yorùbá poems written by women and contend that the poems are essentially socio-political commentary which at the time of publication, pre-occupied Yorùbá society, and Nigeria at large.

Taking a broad look at Yorùbá studies in general, few women are featured among writers in Yorùbá language, and most especially in poetic writings. Nevertheless, this does not mean there are no thriving creative activities going on among Yorùbá women (many reasons may be adduced to this lacking). First, it may be due to the pre-occupation of womenfolk with domestic affairs. And secondly, the observation of Stimpson in Benstock (1987) has captured some of the rationale behind this when she says:

...men have controlled history, politics, and culture. They have decided who will have power and who will not; which realities will be represented and taught, and which will not. In so doing, men have relegated women, as women, to the margins of culture, if not to silence and invisibility (p. 2).

Although there are many African women writing in the English language medium, their writing in the Yorùbá language medium is not as prolific, hence they are generally prominent in Yorùbá oral poetry. Thus, the discussion in this paper will feature the following recurrent themes: women, men, and the state of the nation, health, morality and religion. Hence, I intend to examine these themes in the published poems of poets: Olúyémisi Adébówálé in her two collections- Ìgbà Lónígáá Kà and Ewì Átàtà and Àrìnpé Adéjùmò in Rò òo re. The other poets, Òláníkè Rájí, Bólá Kóládè, Moriiké Ádígún, Tutù Òdúnsí, Olúyémí Àkàngé have their poems in male edited texts titled Wá Gbó and Àpéró Ewì. And interestingly enough, the issue of gender in Yorùbá literary study has only become popular in the last decades via the works of scholars like Oyèşakin, Ilésanmí and Sheba.

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One of the favorite themes among female poets is about women as wife and mother and their importance which eulogizes women and their attributes in terms of their physical beauty, place in the family, hard work, and trustworthiness. Thus the poets analyze how society perceives women, and their overall importance in regards to the home, especially in childcare. And in this regard the poets appreciate the efforts of the mother on the child as Adéjumọ enumerates in ‘Èrè lábọ oja’,

Iṣẹ iyá ń ẹ̀lórí ọmọ ọ ẹ̀ yọ̀rù
Ká fọtọ
Ká fógbe
Àísùn ọ́sé ẹ̀lṣẹ̀ṣe party (p. 51).

(The efforts of the mother on the child
cannot be enumerated
Washing nappies
Washing faeces...
Keeping vigil while not attending a party)

In this case, the female poets admonish parents to lay good examples for their wards to follow as evident in Adébówálé ‘Wón ń wọ yín’ and Atééře loge’, where indecent dressing by the females is condemned (Ìgbà Lonígbaá Kà pp. 25-27; 44-48).

Also, the danger in over-pampering the child is presented in the poem titled ‘Bánkémo’ by Adébówálé. She raises questions on the rationale for this and equally provides answers to the questions in the poems by pointing out that such mothers are only out to ruin their own future and the future of the child. Yet, her opinion and suggestions is that pampering and training should go together, and in the final construct, traditional practices of peer training and discipline for children should be adhered to in order to help the child. She thus says:

Àmọ́ bẹ́ ẹ́ kẹ́mọ́ tọ́mọ́ ẹ́dín...
Ori ara yín lẹ́ ń bájẹ́
Ayé ọmọ yín lẹ́ ń tayó
Bí wọ́n réni bómọ́ yín wí
Té ẹ́ ní kí wọ́n ńṣẹ́nu ní gbólágún
Pómọ́ ọ́ gbọ́n-ón bómọ́ dágbá
Kí ní pà ní tó jágò lọ́ ọjáre
(But if you over-pamper the child to a fault
You are destroying your own future
You are toying with the future of your child
If you have someone to discipline your child
And you say they should keep off
That the child will become wise when he is older
What kills more than foolishness?
You have forgotten that
Only one person gives birth to a child
Many people look after him
Disciplining does not kill the child
It only moulds him into the right path
It is only the over-pampered child that disgraces one
As you pamper the child
Make sure you train him.)
Here the poet notices the issue of breastfeeding and a campaign by various bodies in Nigeria to encourage women to breastfeed. And poets like Olánike Raji enumerated its benefit which is like giving immunity to the child, enabling him or her to develop well and aid in quick recovery for the mother after childbirth (Wá Gbó pp. 47-51).

In juxtaposition, with childcare and modern women is drug abuse which Adébòwálé condemns the attitudes and actions as addressed in her poems which reports that toddlers are subjected to hardship via hair braiding when mothers give children drugs overdoses to ease the pain (Ígbà Lonígbàá Kà, pp. 20-22). An abuse practiced in the day-care centers scattered throughout the society, a practice that can harm the future of females.

The poets also identify women’s powers, typically physical and sexual powers. For example, in the poem ‘Agbára yẹpere əbí ɨnlà?’, Adébòwálé appreciates women physical power regarded as their effort in performing the functions of: taking care of the home, the husband, cooking, and child caring and so on, which only women can cope with effectively and efficiently in the society. Equally, sexual power is used by women to exercise power over men to assist in procreation and to make men emotionally and psychologically stable, thus Adébòwálé admonishes men to appreciate women rather than relegating them (Ewì Àtàtà pp. 48-50).

Another topical issue raised in the poems by female poet concerns women experience in matrimony. In Rò òó re, Adéjùmọ frowned at the practice of in-laws scolding the wife while the wife is not expected to reply. She is expected to address the in-laws by nicknames in order not to attract their anger. The modern women attitudes of committing abortion and throwing the child away are also condemned and seen as wickedness. The poets therefore advise such women to take caution and go for family planning methods in hospitals so as to avoid unwanted pregnancies that can lead to wicked acts (pp. 19-21).

Also, the poets in the treatment of women in marriage do not leave out the issue of widowhood and its problems in Yorùbá society wherein the death of the husband is a stage of castigation for the wife because she is accused of causing the death, and the in-laws in most cases go away with the belongings, leaving the wife with nothing which is linked to the problem of inheritance, and the practice of expecting one of the in-laws to inherit the widow in order to continue the family lineage. Understandingly, female poets are very skeptical about this practice, and thus advice women to beware of the deceit of men.

In general, all the poets express their surprise about the way society looks at women and treats her despite all her capacities, capabilities and limitations. Yet, they also religiously think that only God could reward women, and thus all urge women to speak out so they can stay free from unwarranted harassments. To this effect Adéjùmọ says:

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Male Behavior Questioned

Another important theme in the poetry of female writers centers on men. Each of the poets gives treatise to men who neglect their responsibilities at home (Ewi Àtàtà pp.56-60) Thus, they all see the need for men to treat their wives well and stop forsaking them especially when things are not rosy. Instead men are admonished to repent from their bad ways and have total love for their wives, and requested to appreciate and praise women rather than condemning them.

According to Adèbòwálé:

Gbogbo akọ tí bá ŋ jepo jiyọ lòbẹ
È má fẹnu ègàn pabo mọ
Gbogbo akọ tára rè gbé pépé
Àní ó yẹ ẹ mọyì abo
(Ewi Àtàtà p. 50).

All men that taste from the soup
Should not damage the female personality
All men that are active
Should be able to appreciate the woman)

Also, both lazy men and uncaring fathers/husbands in the society were identified in the poems. While the poets condemn this attitude, they equally enjoin them to work and live up to expectations, and Adèbòwálé says:

Akọ tí ójí lówúrò fòwò lérán
Akọ tí ó jí lówúrò káwò bọtan
Akọ tí ó níṣẹ à á ṣe
Akọ tí ó lóko à á ro

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Irú wọn yẹ léni à á sáátá...
Bùkâtà ẹbí ń bẹ nilè
Wọn kò, wọn ń gbó ọ ...  
Íwọ akọ alápámáṣísé
Yára térò araà rẹ pa bó ọ fẹ tẹ
(Ewí Àtàtà pp.10-11)

(Men who wake up in the morning gazing
Men who wake up in the morning doing nothing
Men that have no work to do
Men that have no farm to hoe
Such should be castigated...
Family responsibilities are there for them
They refuse and neglected them...
You lazy men
You better have a re-think to avoid disgrace.)

Other behavioral traits of men were expounded in the poems as covetousness, and according Adébòwálé in ‘Ìwá wọn ni’ (It’s their character) men are the most covetous among all animals, hence she says:

Èdá tó lójú kòkòrò táko ọ sí
Bi wọn láya silé
Abo tòde ni ó máa ń dá wọn lójùn (Ewí Àtàtà p. 67)

(No creature is as covetous as men
If they have wives at home
They will be admiring the women outside)
Continuing, other vices of men are promiscuity arising from their inability to exercise self-control over their bodies, drunkenness, wandering and wife battering as the poets see men as more jealous and envious than women. Adéjùmò describes the situation as follows:

À á tíí ò gbodò kókúnrinkókúnrin
Ìbáá jébí tábi ojúlúmò ò?
Èwo ní tọkọ
Táya è ó gbodò kálajógbé
Mo ráya tí ó gbodò báko sọrọ kárè òkọ...
Bó bá dán an wò
Ó dí dandan kilé ó gbójikan
Báya bégbè ròde ọrán
Ọjọwúkúnrin a lé ténté bí ọdẹ
A máa wọkọ tí yọọ gbáya wálẹ...
A wá lára obinrin lowú pin sí...
Irọ́ ñ puró fúnró...
Owú tí ñ bẹ́ lára akọ
Kí í ñgbè tabo (pp. 33-34).

(What do we do to a husband?  
Whose wife must not greet another man?  
Even if he is a relative or friend  
What of a husband  
Whose wife must not greet a neighbour  
I've seen a wife who must not talk to other men except the husband...
If she tries it
Problem starts
If the wife goes out with
friends
The jealous man will stay put
watching out
For the vehicle that will bring
the wife home.
Then we say the women are
very jealous
It's all lies...
The envy with a man
Is not comparable to that of
the woman.)

The issues raised in the above poems are examples of current problems in society, often causing separation and divorce in families. But above all, men are challenged in the poems to take a critical look at their biased opinions about women and change their attitudes. And with regards to wife battering, men who indulge in such acts are likened to the famous boxers (Mike Tyson and Mohammed Ali) as other men make laws that generally incapacitate women.

Indeed, the female poets are not deaf to the happenings in their environment. Adébòwálé condemns military rule and ushers in democracy with fanfare in her presentation. She reminds the military to go back to the barracks to perform the security role assigned to them instead of poking noising into politics (Igbà Lonígbàá Kà pp. 28-29).

Plural Politics and Democracy

With the introduction of plural politics and democracy in Nigeria, it becomes inevitable that poets should take it as one of their themes. In the tribulations of modern day politicians for power, poor behavior and negative attitudes have been added to the ethos of Nigeria. Thus, it is expressed as:

...òṣèlú ọde-ôní ọ lè dánú rò
Wọn á tèra wọn mèrè torí Ọta
Ètò ídágbásókè òwúòjọ ọ je wọn lógún
Kí wọn jẹgbèlègbè ówọ kó ló mu wọn lómù
(Èwí Àtàtà p. 25).
(...today's politicians cannot think deeply
They attack each other because of food
Developmental programme for the society is not their concern
To steal plenty of money is their major pre-occupation)

In this section she admonishes older politicians to lay good examples for the new generation to follow, and that they should make haste to improve the lots of the people in the society.

And likewise, in the poem ‘Eré orí igi’, in regard to the general state of the nation, Adébòwálé blames the elders for the problems of the society. As she reveals:

Orin bó le wó kó wó
Ti fẹčkan gbẹnú ọgbà kan
Ọmọdé bórin ọhún nilè ni
Ará iwájú lèwe ŋ wò sáré
Ọwú iyá gbọ sì lọmọ ó ran
(Ewí Atàtà p. 40).

(‘I-don’t-care’ attitude was the songs
From the mouth of the elders
Children grew to meet the songs
The children are imitating the elders in their race
The child spins the cotton gathered by the mother.)

Social Ills: Attitude, Police and Indifference

Nigeria, especially the Yoruba society is nowadays decked by indiscipline, corruption and other unpatriotic attitudes. Everyone is putting on the lax attitude. Nobody is ready to make enough sacrifice for things to progress. Therefore, the poet in her anxiety ends the poem with a rhetorical question- ‘Bó o lọlà ó ṣe wà rí?’(p. 40). (How would the future be?)
Among the characteristic attitude of Nigerians inhibiting the progress of the country that the poets mention is both the inhuman and unruly behavior of the Nigeria policemen towards the students and the public at large. This attitude is strongly condemned by all the poets. It is a common practice for the police to behave irrationally when it comes to dealing with unarmed citizens. In fact, it is widely known that the Nigeria police and the Nigerian students' unions are sworn enemies. For any action, the students and their neighbors are tear-gassed, detained, brutalized or killed for no just reason. To confirm such act, a poet says:

Lołópaaá náà wá gbinájẹ
À á ti í fí ni joyè àwòdí
Kéeỳàn má tún le gbádíyẹ
Lołópaaá wá gboró
Wọ̀n ó monílé yàtò sálejò
Wọ̀n yin tajútajú tí tí
Wọ̀n yin in sógo wèçè
dánwò (Ewì Àtàtà p. 63).

(Then the policemen became
mad
How can they account
For their inability to perform
Then the policemen grew
wild
Not able to differentiate the
landlords from the visitors
They tear-gassed severally
They even tear-gassed
children)

Other ills of the society are of major concern to the poets in their poems, thus I will review some of the major ills addressed by the poets:

- Adébòwálé speaks of bribery and corruption which are given various terms like ‘419’, ‘gbájúè’(slap his face), ‘business’, ‘settlement’ and ègúnjẹ within Nigeria context, in two poems titled ‘Gbájúè’ and ‘Ègúnjẹ’. After giving a detailed explanation of the tricks and intrigues of the practice, she vehemently condemns this practice which is cancerous in the growth of the nation and tarnish the image of the country, and her citizenship among other nations (Ìgbà Lonígbáá Kà pp.39-43; 59).
With the increase in the wages of workers in Nigeria, many people can now afford to own vehicles which have increased in the rate of accident in the country. Both Adéjúmọ and Adébòwálé noticed this and trace the causes to careless driving or riding by both motorists and motorcyclists, and the illegal packing of vehicles. They therefore admonish the citizens to obey necessary traffic rules in order to avoid untimely death and casualties resulting from disobedience (Ró óo re pp. 10-12; Ewì Atàtà pp. 65-66).

Another ill noticed in the society and addressed by the poets is the issue of frequent fire outbreaks in homes and government offices states in which fire consume properties and vital documents that can never be retrieved. She raises alarm on the trend of killing among cultists and advises students to face their studies not cultism that may appear in the educational system. According, the warning is:

Egbékégbé nií múni ríkúkikú he
Èyìn akékọọ ẹ kiyésára
Ohun a bá wájá là á dojúkọ
(p.62).

(Bad gang leads to untimely death
Students, be vigilant
Face your studies)

The poet also critiques popular education for its sandwich and part-time courses that hinder student learning as some disrupt the learning process in jam-packed but not fully comprehended lectures (Ìgbà Lonígbáá Kà pp.51-53).

The poets critique scarcity of essential products in a nation harvesting them as poets discuss the inability of the rulers to provide enough petroleum products for the use of the citizens which often leads to increase prices and the suffering of more people. But the only solution they proffer is for all to beg the government to make the products available! (Ìgbà Lonígbáá Kà pp.66-70; Àpérò Ewì pp. 34-36).

Leaving little room for one to escape social responsibility, our poets also examine the dictum of ‘health is wealth’ as two poets deconstruct baby formula in favor of breastfeeding. Hence in Wá Gbó, Ráji enjoins all nursing mothers to give breast milk to their children, and condemns the practice of giving baby formulas to children. And according to the poet, breastfeeding has a number of advantages for both the mother and the child and also the society.

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These advantages include providing good immunity, aiding proper growth and development, aiding quick recovery for the mother after child delivery and providing the society with good citizens. Hence, in-part of her poem says:

Gbogbo èyí mo rò pò
Pé ká bára wa sọ ọkodoro òrò
Pé táá báá bímọ tán
Ká rójú ká fomi ọmú tiwa főmọ
Ká ma gbékélé wàrà màálùù...
Ìyá ikokó tì ò jé kómọ rẹ ránhùn ọyàn
Abé irú wọn kì í pé jinná
Àrùn húgehüge a si gbókèèrè worù wọn
Ọmọ a fún lọyàn a dàgbà wèréwèré
Alukutu-bọnbọ nirú wọn jẹ láwújọ ọmọ weære

(All these I consider
That we should tell each other the truth
That after giving birth
We should endeavour to breastfeed our children
We should not rely on cow's milk...
The nursing mother whose child is not thirsty of breast milk
Her vagina heals quickly
All ailments will not affect them
A child that is breastfed will develop quickly
They become bouncing babies among their peers)

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In regards to the deadly disease of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), Adébòwálé provides an educative treatise as she enumerates the causes, signs and symptoms of the killer disease which include using un-sterilized needles, contact with a carrier's blood, sexual intercourse with infected persons et cetera. Thus, she sees AIDS as a punishment for promiscuity and warns the people, both young and old on the helplessness of the orthodox medicine in effecting a total treatment, and equally gives remedies to its devastation as sexual abstinence and using sterilized needles for any cut on the body. And last, she laments on the sorrowful state that both the victim and his/her predicament and advises that all should pray to God to help eradicate the disease (Wá Gbó pp. 102-104).

As could be read through all the themes in their poems, female poets admonish readers on the need to believe in God, worship and praise Him all the time. Adébòwálé and Adéjúmọ were able to enlighten readers on the need to identify fake and false ministers/saviors from the genuine and true ones. And according to Adéjúmọ

...àwọn aṣojú tòótó ñ bẹ̀ ní sàà yìí
Won pò bí ewé rúmò
Bójisẹ̀ tòótó ti wá pò tó
Àwọn ojìṣẹ̀ èké náà o șàipò...
Ọpọ̀ ojìṣẹ̀ èké ti ñ bẹ̀ nílè yìí
Ti fètan tútù bayé abo jẹ̀
(p.35)

(...There are good representatives in this period
They are as many as the leaves on a tree
As the genuine ministers are many
So also are the fake ones...
Many of the fake ministers in this country
Have use deceit to spoil the personality of the female.)
Therefore there is need for all to trust God and believe not what human beings say; and believers need to be cautious because some happenings are some of the signs of the end-time. Hence they preach the Christian doctrine of belief in a heavenly home, a point where they are metaphorically saying via poems that the world is like a market where people go to buy and sell or a farm where one goes to work, but at the end of the day people return to their various homes which is a heaven. Thus she says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ayé ki i ṣebí à á gbé sí} \\
\text{Bá a rojà láàràò à á darí wálé} \\
\text{Ojà layé èdá} \\
\text{Orun nilé gbogbo wa} \\
(Ewì Ātàtà p. 22).
\end{align*}
\]

(The world is not one to live in forever
If we go to the market in the morning,
we must come back home
The world is man’s market
Heaven is everybody’s home.

Hence, she implores everyone to think of the end, and of the heavenly home in all his or her actions in this world.

On the issue of moral, the female poets as mothers did not miss words on the need for parents to be good examples for their children to follow. They condemned untruthfulness by elders and stress the need for the young to respect elders and take to their words. Also, the theme of ‘let the young grow’ occupies their poems and they advised the adults not to pull the young ones down. Therefore, they implore everybody to behave well in any position they find themselves, be it masters, servants, writers, children, parents, judges or politicians. And they also advised that we should not copy or imitate others doing bad for this can lead to wickedness. Thus Adébòwálè says:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Eṇi và forí wóří} \\
\text{Ẹtẹ a màá kàngún sì wọn} \\
\text{Eṇi và šàfarawé} \\
\text{Àbúkù ní kàn gbèyin} \\
(Ewì Ātàtà p.3).
\end{align*}
\]
Conversantly, Olúyemí Akàndé in Àpérò Ewì commented on the evils of modernization, wherein she says that so-called ‘civilization’ has turned everything upside down to the extent that we no longer cherish our age long tradition of giving respect to all who are due for respect, because adultery, fornication and abortion are witnessed everyday, and even our dressing code has changed for the worse.

In conclusion, despite the above observations, the few Yorùbá female poets in this paper have started a good process, they have been able to reflect and comment on what is happening in the wider society; they have enable us to read the minds of women on various issues affecting themselves in contrast to what is expressed in poems written by men. And above all, their poems have succeeded in exposing contradictions, and have stimulated some men to abolish negative practices.

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