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The Tragedy of The Girl-Child: A Feminist Reading of Ngozi Omeje's *The Conquered Maiden* and Amma Darko's *Faceless*

Clement Olujide Ajidahun

Abstract

This paper is a critical interrogation of Ngozi Omeje's The Conquered Maiden and Amma Darko's Faceless from the feminist ideological perspective. While Ngozi Omeje looks at the place of the girl-child from the Igbo's cultural world view using the platform of the theater, Amma Darko explores the predicament and the subjugation of the girl-child from the Ghanaian socio-cultural perspective using the novel as her medium. This paper examines the predicaments and the socio-cultural prejudice against the girl-child in the patriarchal society of Nigeria and in matriarchal Ghanaian society. The theoretical framework of the paper is based on the feminist sociological theory that re-examines and compares the treatment of women vis-a-vis men in society. This theory also evaluates issues of bias, prejudice and discrimination against women, and by implication the girl-child, to determine whether or not women have been fairly or justly treated in society. This paper establishes, based on visual and non-visual signifiers in the texts, that the girl-child is a victim of discrimination in both Nigerian and Ghanaian societies. Both texts confirm the hostility of society towards the girl-child, and its preference for the men who are seen to be more reliable and dependable, and who are believed to be the carriers and preservers of the seed of progeny. This paper analyzes the writers' condemnation of these prejudicial, discriminatory and hostile behavioral attitudes against the girl-child. Both texts are thus interpreted as a biting satire against gender discrimination in African societies.

Keywords: Girl-Child, Women, Gender Discrimination, Feminism, Literature.

The position of women in society has been a frequent focus of Nigerian female writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, Flora Nwapa, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and Catherine Acholonu, who have engaged in literary polemics, using their arts to defend the positions of women in society. These writers present women as victims of gender discrimination, societal oppression and spousal abuse. Their works have shown them as advocates and defenders of the rights of women. Condemning the plays of Ama Ata Aidoo, Joy Eyesi and Chinonso Okolo write that women are depicted as “devilish, disadvantaged, and deprived masses” and as “a negligible and unorganized force, with little political and economic involvement,” in spite of the fact that they constitute the mainstream of the society’s workforce, especially in rural areas.¹

Hence, the need for women’s empowerment becomes urgent and inevitable. This study interrogates the predicaments of the girl-child in Ngozi Omeje’s play *The Conquered Maiden* and Amma Darko’s novel *Faceless*. While *The Conquered Maiden* is a play written by a Nigerian female lawyer and playwright set in the Eastern part of Nigeria, *Faceless* is Amma Darko’s third novel. The novel is set in Accra, Ghana, which is used as a microcosm of Ghanaian society. In his article “Woman Being in the African Society,” Emeka Nwabueze traces the trajectory of female domination to the traditional African societies where heroic duties such as warring, hunting, and cultivating were reserved and performed by men while women were limited to cooking, hewing wood, and fetching water.² This was because men were considered to be more muscular and brawny than women, who are still regarded as weak and feeble. This paper is, therefore, a critical interrogation of the vulnerability of the girl-child in a patriarchal African society. The African society that discriminates against the girl-child and makes her a perpetual tragic victim of its cultural traditions forms the fulcrum of this discourse.

The findings of Basse et al. on gender discrimination in occupational practices in the traditional setting in Nigeria show that even though both men and women are engaged in indigenous occupations such as hunting, farming, and trading, the women work under the guidance and leadership of men.³ Asiyanbola and Aina further explain that the patriarchal nature of the traditional societies in Africa, which consider certain jobs and tasks

like domestic chores to be the exclusive duties of women while men are generally classified as possessing “strength, vigor, courage, [and] self-confidence” among other sterling qualities, enables men to be involved in more tasking jobs.^{4,5} In order to ensure that these defined sex roles are adhered to strictly, taboos are imposed on offenders.

In contemporary African societies, women’s liberation movements, which have come under different ideological labels such as Women in Nigeria (WIN) and the Federation of Muslim Women of Nigeria (FOMWAN), have fought against all forms of gender discrimination, oppression, and exploitation of women that have made women to be objects of social injustice and societal prejudice. Masculinity and patriarchy, which are social constructs and traditional paradigms without any biological proof, enhance gender discrimination in society. African women contribute significantly to the development of society both in the traditional and modern era. They are described as the foundation and the feeders of the nations. Such contributions, therefore, confer on African women prestigious roles in society.⁶

It is against this background that this study is undertaken to examine the tragedy of the girl-child as depicted in Ngozi Omeje’s *The Conquered Maiden* and Amma Darko’s *Faceless*.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts African feminism as its theoretical framework. In the paper, African feminism is distinguished from its precursors that dominated the scene before 1960, after which varieties of modern feminism continue to flourish. This discourse does not countenance the complexities and the intricacies of conceptualizing or taxonomizing Africa. Africa, in this context, will refer to the geographical space rather than the metaphorical or historiographical polemics. Feminism in the African context, according to Ogundipe-Leslie, “is not calling for a reversal of gender roles, and it is not a call for a particular sexual orientation; neither is it in opposition to men and African culture.”⁷

African feminism recognizes the existence of other forms of feminism such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, cultural feminism and Islamic feminism. African feminism, according to Ogundipe-Leslie, is “a kind of red flag to the bull

of African men.”⁸ African feminism, therefore, calls for the overhauling and amelioration of the conditions of women in which women will be economically, politically and socially empowered to enable them to be involved in the societal transformation without compromising their motherhood and recognizing their biological and reproductive rights.⁹ Although this view is also shared by other forms of feminism, African feminism lays more emphasis on the complementary roles of both genders in enhancing societal growth and development in addition to the welfare of women.

Mekgwe defines African feminism, while acknowledging the complexities that surround the linguistic and socio-cultural realities of African women, as

A discourse that takes care to delineate those concerns peculiar to the African situation. It also questions features of traditional African values without denigrating them, understanding that these might be viewed differently to the different classes of women.¹⁰

That is the concern of Olomjobi when he says that African feminism is concerned with African nuances without disparaging them in view of the various socio-economic classes and socio-cultural backgrounds that define the identities of the African women. He says that

African feminism rests on the notion that women in Africa are socially constructed by different cultural components. . . . The theory attempts to shift away from misleading notions of equating western values with non-western societies. The point to bear in mind is that African women have different identities and primordial attachment to region and cultural determinants than women from western societies.¹¹

One of the main objectives of African feminism, according to Arndt, is to dismantle the current atmosphere of domination and then transform the concept of gender roles in African societies in order to improve the conditions of African women.¹²

In his conceptualization of African feminism, Badeji shows that womanness is the center of African feminism. In addition, he describes the relationship between power and femininity as mutual. He also captures other features of African feminism thus:

African feminism embraces femininity, beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power. It is always poised and centered in womanness. It demonstrates that power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical. African femininity complements African masculinity, and defends both with the ferocity of the lioness while simultaneously seeking male defense of both as critical, demonstrable, and mutually obligatory.¹³

African feminism critically interrogates gender discrimination from the African perspective with a view to elevating the roles of African women who are seen traditionally as the carriers of societal encumbrances and whose roles must be made complementary to the roles of the men. It is only in this context that African women can be liberated from the socio-cultural, patriarchal and phallogocentric shackles that have tied them down for long, without which the entire African continent will remain in bondage. This theory is apposite for this paper because it condemns and opposes all forms of gender discrimination and prejudices experienced by African women. It also recognizes the biological and motherly roles of women which do not inhibit them from participating in societal transformation as men do.

Textual Analysis

Omeje's play *The Conquered Maiden* tells the story of Akaego, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ogu. Akaego is engaged to Chris, and arrangements for their wedding are in progress as Chris has just secured the consent of Akaego's parents to allow them to spend their honeymoon in Italy. According to Chris, "we would go shopping at the classic Italian boutiques in Rome and Milan."¹⁴ Akaego is greatly excited and delighted about her forthcoming wedding as she freely and gleefully expresses her joy to her fiancé: "Oh C-h-r-i-s. I am so happy. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me."¹⁵

Akaego's joy is short-lived as her expectation for a great wedding is punctured by the Chief Priest's announcement and declaration that *Okpuku*, the great deity of Omamu, requires a replacement for one of the eight women who serve the *Okpuku*, since one was "struck dead recently by the deity for committing adultery and lying under oath."¹⁶ According to the Chief Priest,

“Akaego is the chosen one. Remember that the decision of the deity is irrevocable and it is death to refuse dedication and service to the deity.”¹⁷

Akaego is to be formally handed over to the Chief Priest for dedication on *Ofoka* festival day. Both Akaego and Chris her fiancé are greatly worried and distressed about this very disruptive development. Akaego asks her father, Mr. Ogu, despondently, “But Papa, what of Chris, my wedding, my education, my life.”¹⁸ Her father sneeringly responds and says “the great deity *Okpuku* will take care of all that. You now belong to him.”¹⁹

Akaego discusses how to subvert the declaration of the Chief Priest with Chris. Even though Chris initially is opposed to the planned dedication of his fiancée to a deity which he regards as primitive and barbaric, he suddenly remembers the grave consequences of defying the laws of the gods of the land. Chris backslides as he tells Akaego “I am sorry, Akaego. It is death to defy the deity. I cannot struggle with the gods over you. You belong to the gods.”²⁰ Akaego feels betrayed by Chris one month to their wedding. Akaego suggests that Chris contact one of the women’s right activists, but is rebuffed because, according to Chris, “the women’s rights groups cannot be of any help when a powerful god like the great *Okpuku* is involved.”²¹

Akaego wonders whether it is a crime to be born a woman. She narrates her ordeals to her good friend Janet and tells her the implications of accepting the verdict of the deity. According to Akaego,

It means I have to stop school and I can no longer marry Chris. It means I will now be married to *Okpuku*, the deity, and will have to spend the rest of my life serving *Okpuku* and the chief priest. It means I will now be handed over to that old chief priest for his sexual pleasure, and I will be bearing children for the deity.²²

Janet reacts strongly against the demands of the chief priest. She shouts and fumes, “Stupid nonsense; what an uncultivated and savage people. This is exactly what my lecturer calls gender violence and the debasement of womanhood. . . . It is a tendentious violation of your dignity and right of self-preservation.”²³ Janet encourages Akaego to allow her contact Lady Silvy, the Coordinator of Women’s Liberty, to fight what she calls “this barbaric and obnoxious custom.”²⁴ Both of them contact Lady Silvy, and

the lawyer is shocked that Akaego's parents agree to "this inhuman tradition."²⁵ She agrees with them to see Akaego's parents in order "to sensitize them to the legal, social and reproductive health implications and dangers of allowing you to be conscripted by an oppressive idol."²⁶

The visit of Lady Silvy and Janet to Akaego's parents does not yield a positive result, and Mr. Ogu impolitely orders them to leave his house. Lady Silvy and Janet decide to visit the chief priest to prevail on him to reconsider his decision about Akaego. Lady Silvy accuses him of "violat[ing] Akaego's reproductive rights and her human dignity."²⁷ This angers the chief priest and he orders them to leave his house because "the custom of our land and *Okpuku's* decision is irreversible."²⁸ Lady Silvy then threatens to go to court to enforce Akaego's fundamental human right. Out of provocation, the chief priest vows that *Okpuku* will deal with them before midnight that day. Janet and Silvy are later involved in a vehicle accident where both are seriously injured and are immediately hospitalized.

The accident is believed to have been caused by the magical charm of the chief priest. Lady Silvy loses interest in Akaego's issue and backs out. According to her, "I am afraid. I have never seen anything like this in my life. I don't want to die for a matter I know nothing about."²⁹ Janet, on the other hand, promises to take Akaego to a pastor for prayers. Akaego's confusion increases as she remembers the grave consequences that await her if she refuses to obey the chief priest. She deceives her parents by making them believe that she is now ready to be dedicated to the deity. The sacrifice is ready, and the chief priest sends for her only to discover that Akaego has left home for an undisclosed destination. Both her parents and the chief priest are angry and completely disappointed at the disappearance of Akaego from the community. The chief priest therefore vows that "she shall be brought back here dead or alive. *Okpuku* knows what to do."³⁰

The setting of the play shifts to Densville, where Akaego has fled. There she is involved in prostitution with her friend, Lucy. In Densville, Akaego meets Dumbi, who becomes her lover and agrees to marry her. He abandons her, however, because she is being tormented with evil dreams. Consequently, she becomes psychologically traumatized. She often experiences fainting attacks. Lucy later discovers that Akaego is in a state of coma. Akaego's

friends decide to take her back to her parents in Omamu community five years after she had left home. Her parents receive the lifeless body of Akaego with regret and pity. They take her quickly to the chief priest who makes some sacrifice to *Okpuku*. According to the chief priest, “the hen has finally fallen into the grill to be roasted.”³¹

After the sacrifice and the dedication of Akaego to the deity, Akaego recovers her consciousness and narrates her experience to her parents, saying, “A mighty snake struck me on my sleeping bed in Densville. I attempted to scream, but my speech was seized.”³² The play ends on a tragic note when Akaego in a mournful tone surrenders to fate and tradition and says:

It is over. I fought as I knew how but- The crime of being born a woman. Goodbye to all my dreams of being a graduate teacher, having a good job, and a happy marriage; I hope someone, somewhere, will rise one day to banish this inhuman tradition. What does the future hold for you? What does it hold for me? How can I cope with this environment and humiliation? How can I live under perpetual subjugation and servitude? Alas! I am a conquered maiden.³³

Here, both the title and the theme of the play are well articulated in Akaego’s lamentation.

On the other hand, Amma Darko’s *Faceless* tells the agonizing tale of a teenage girl, Fofu, and her sister, Baby T, who are victims of parental negligence. Fofu lives on the street in Accra, Ghana, where she narrowly escapes the sexual assault of Poison, one of the notorious street criminals and urchins. Fofu is asleep in one of the shops in the Agboghloshie market when she wakes up to find that Poison is trying to sexually assault her. Fofu narrowly escapes the assault and shares the ugly experience with her friend, Odarley. She also tells her mother, Maa Tsuru, who advises her to be careful with Poison and to leave Accra.

Even after she breaks off from Poison and Odarley and leaves for Accra, specifically the area named Sodom and Gomorrah, she steals Kabira’s purse to support herself. Kabira is one of the founders of MUTE, a non-governmental organization committed to information gathering and documenting social issues. Kabira decides to share Fofu’s story with the MUTE organization and with her colleagues who resolve to tackle the street

girl phenomenon in Ghana by partnering with Harvest FM Radio Station.

It is the synergy between MUTE and the Harvest FM Radio that leads to the investigation of the predicaments of street children. The root causes of street life are revealed through the interview conducted with Fofu, Poison, Maa Tsuru, Naa Yomo, Kwei and others. The investigation further reveals that Maa Tsuru deliberately turns Baby T, her third daughter and Fofu's elder sister, into a street girl in order to save her from incessant sexual assault by Onko. Onko is a relative and a friend of Maa Tsuru who uses his closeness with Maa Tsuru's family to sexually abuse Baby T, who has come to see Onko as her good uncle without knowing that he is a rapist.

The resolution of the conflicts in the novel is made possible with the investigation carried out by MUTE and the Harvest FM Radio Station, which reveals the root cause of Baby T's death and how she becomes a street girl. Without the investigation, it would have been difficult to know that Poison was responsible for the murder of Baby T, which underscores the importance of investigative journalism and the significant roles that non-governmental organizations play in the development of society.

Thematic Concerns

Parental Negligence

Both texts demonstrate very clearly that parental irresponsibility exposes the family, especially the girl-child, to dangers, making them vulnerable to all sorts of attacks in society. In *Faceless*, Kwei and Kpakpo are irresponsible fathers; hence, their children become street urchins. We are even told that the father of Maa Tsuru disowns the pregnancy that produces Fofu. Kpakpo, the stepfather of Baby T and Onko, sexually assaults Baby T. Consequently, Baby T goes into prostitution. She becomes a tool of sexual exploitation in the hands of the likes of Kpakpo, Poison, Maa Tsuru and others. All this happens because the parents shirk their parental responsibilities to their children.

In the *Conquered Maiden*, Mr. and Mrs. Ogu are tactless and irresponsible parents, who because of their fear of *Okpuku* god freely and willingly offer the god their promising girl-child, Akaego, to be sacrificed to the idol even when preparations are

being made for her wedding to Chris. Akaego's parents do not consider her education or truncated future, though parents are usually expected to protect their children. It amounts to parental recklessness for Mr. Ogu to agree gleefully and willingly to Akaego's marriage to Okpuku. Akaego is released to marry a deity against her will just as Fofu is released to marry a faceless street urchin. Both Akaego in *Conquered Maiden* and Baby T in *Faceless* pay the supreme sacrifice due to parental irresponsibility.

The Girl-Child/Female Question Phenomenon

Both the *Conquered Maiden* and *Faceless* adequately capture the vulnerability of women and gender discrimination in society. Akaego's future in *Conquered Maiden* is mortgaged and sacrificed to a blood thirsty idol who relishes in sucking the blood of virgins and promising women. *Okpuku* is not interested in men but in talented young virgins. Such a cultural practice is vehemently condemned as discriminatory, barbaric, idolatrous and atrocious. It does not have respect for the personal rights of Akaego — either as an individual or as a citizen of Omamu — which must be respected like that of any other free citizen.

Similarly, Fofu and Baby T in *Faceless* are victims of parental irresponsibility and societal negligence. Both of them suffer from sexual assault. Baby T is sexually violated by her stepfather with impunity, and she becomes a victim of sexual exploitation. In the process, she loses her life. Both Akaego and her friend Lucy are involved in prostitution in Densville out of frustration. Akaego, who comes from a good home, becomes a fugitive and vagabond in a strange land because the *Okpuku* deity of Omamu insists she has to be married to him. The hostility from home makes Akaego run away and slave away her life. Eventually she is cut down in her prime by *Okpuku*. That brings an untimely end to her planned marriage, career, and education.

Fofu and Baby T become street girls as a result of the recklessness and unfriendly attitude of their parents. Further, Akaego is betrayed by Chris, her fiancé who refuses to stand by her and defy the edict of the deity. For fear of being attacked by the deity, Chris betrays Akaego a month before their wedding. Akaego thus suffers another debilitating blow. Both Akaego and Baby T are presented as victims of gender oppression.

Sexploitation

There have been arguments among male and female African writers on what some African female writers refer to as the negative portrayal of women by male writers who see women as the appendages and sex tools in the hands of men. In other words, female characters are depicted as prostitutes as if that is what women represent in society. For instance, Ekwensi portrays Jagua Nana in *Jagua Nana* as a prostitute. Similarly, Ngugi does the same thing with Wanja in *Petals of Blood*, as if men are insulated from prostitution. Both Akaego and Baby T are portrayed as prostitutes in *The Conquered Maiden* and *Faceless*. The attempt here is not to denigrate the image of women in society but to expose and condemn the causative agents that predispose women to and make them vulnerable to prostitution and sexual abuse. None of the characters is projected as an object of defamation, castigation, or vilification for unethical behaviors, but as innocent victims of familial, societal, and cultural victimization and oppression.

Contrary to the belief of African feminist writers like Flora Nwapa and Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, who have continued to criticize male writers for associating women with moral laxity, prostitution, and witchcraft in their works, both Ngozi Emeje and Amma Darko portray both men and women as agents of moral unscrupulousness.³⁴ In *Faceless*, Baby T is depicted as a prostitute, but so are Onko and Kpakpo, Baby T's stepfather.

While both texts condemn the abuse of women, the men are attacked for being the instigators and instruments of cruelty against women in society. Men like Mr. Ogu in *The Conquered Maiden* and Kpakpo and Onko in *Faceless* are condemned and criticized for being agents of cultural, colonial, and imperialistic brutality. While writing on the societal and historical realities of the gender binaries, Davies posits that "it is easier to eliminate the colonial, bourgeois influences that were imposed on us and identified with the enemy than to eliminate generations of tradition from within our own society."³⁵ In other words, if the people are desperate and resolute, colonial legacies are easier to tackle than the people's traditions which are primordial and aboriginal. People can be very emotional about such cultural and mythological issues like religion, belief systems, taboos, and folktales, which are seen as inalienable parts of their culture that must be preserved.

Conclusion

The tragic image of the African girl-child has been clearly portrayed in Ngozi Omeje's *The Conquered Maiden* and Amma Darko's *Faceless*. Our attention is called to the gory and traumatic experiences of African women who are stigmatized daily and viewed as second-class citizens. They have become the objects of victimization and oppression in a patriarchal society. The tragedies of Akaego in *The Conquered Maiden* and Fofu and Baby T in *Faceless* can be attributed to two major factors as expressed by the writers. The first factor is the African traditional culture that makes the roles of the African gods and deities inviolable, while the second factor is the family system which confers the headship of the family on the husband and subordinates the wife to him.

Lady Silvy, the Coordinator of Women's Liberty in *The Conquered Maiden*, performs a similar role to that of Syly Po of Harvest FM in *Faceless*. While Lady Silvy is a lawyer and a human rights activist who deploys her legal skills to fight for oppressed women in society, Syly Po uses his "Good Morning, Ghana" (GMG) show to address diverse social issues bedeviling society. Both of them are deeply concerned with human predicaments. Lady Silvy risks her life and profession for Akaego, while Syly Po risks his life also and takes to investigative journalism to unravel the circumstances surrounding the mysterious death of Fofu and to tackle the street girl phenomenon. Coincidentally, Silvy in *The Conquered Maiden* and Syly in *Faceless* share similar phonological and morphological configurations. Undoubtedly, this will be of interest to scholars of comparative literature.

Finally, where the man shirks his responsibility and the wife is not empowered economically to shoulder the family responsibilities, the girl-child is made vulnerable as a victim of criminal activities. Even when the woman is empowered economically, the society frowns at her taking over the family responsibility, which would be seen as usurpation of the role of the husband. So tyranny, inviolability of the gods, cultural recklessness, idolatry, and parental irresponsibility constitute the tragic essence of the texts. Such paradigms that predispose women to become menaced on the street and made pawns in the hands of the gods are viewed as manifestations of gender oppression and abuse because of the exclusivity of men.

Notes

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- ² Emeka Nwabueze, "Woman Being in the African Society," in *African Female Playwriting: A Study of Matter and Manner*, ed. Emeka Nwabueze (Enugu, Nigeria: ABIC Books, 2016): 82.
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- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Ibid., 22.

²¹ Ibid., 23.

²² Ibid., 25-26.

²³ Ibid., 26-27.

²⁴ Ibid., 27.

²⁵ Ibid., 31.

²⁶ Ibid., 31-32.

²⁷ Ibid., 39.

²⁸ Ibid., 38.

²⁹ Ibid., 44.

³⁰ Ibid., 56.

³¹ Ibid., 70.

³² Ibid., 73.

³³ Ibid., 73-74.

³⁴ Flora Nwapa, "Women and Creative Writing in Africa," in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 531.

³⁵ Miranda Davies, *Third World-Second Sex. Women's Struggles and National Liberation* (London: Zed Books, 1987), 131.