

AFRICAN LITERATURE AND BEAUVOIRISM:
THE EXAMPLE OF SELECTED WOMEN’S ACTION AND WOMEN WRITERS

By

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An understanding of the place of Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of otherness in African literature requires a look at literature in its broad sense that not only includes orature and written literature but also the literature that unfolds before our eyes in the form of dramatic action. This broad perspective is important for a deeper appreciation of the intersection of Beauvoir’s ideas with African literatures. For purposes of space, however, we shall limit the discussion to the linguistic naming of women’s marginality called *uwa umu-nwany* by the Igbo (Nigeria) and *bopoto* theatrical action of the Shona (Zimbabwe) as well as the literary endeavor of Flora Nwapa and Sekai Nzenza-Shand whose writings connect the Igbo and Shona linguistic naming and theatrical action respectively. The discussion will show that the theory of Otherness:

- (a) intersects with African women’s language and gender action
- (b) is important in understanding the literature of women in Africa
- (c) makes a case for parallelism and possibility of influence.

Simone de Beauvoir and the concept of “Otherness” (de Beauvoir, 1953:29) in *The Second Sex* hardly need introduction because of their centrality in gender studies and feminist discourse for which de Beauvoir has been acclaimed as “the greatest feminist theorist of our time” (Moi, 1985: 92) and her book “a text that occupies a central position in the history of discourse on women and feminism” (Marks and Courtivron, 1989: 39). Otherness is a theory of objectification of women in a world where men constitute the center and the standard. It clarifies the predicament of women in the social, political and cultural life in terms of their marginalization and construction as inferior reflections of the standard which is male: woman as man’s inferior Other. It clarifies the central/marginal, standard/other dichotomy. ‘Otherness’ is a universal concept based on the patriarchal order of society in which the authority ‘of the father’ is paramount and permeates all facets of life. Thus, the concept can be applied in the criticism of African traditional orature and modern written literature.

UWA UMU-NWANYI

Literary and linguistic studies have shown that language and literature have symbiotic relationship with culture and therefore are major vehicles in the transmission of gender (Thorne and Henley, 1975). The verbal, literary and dramatic action of traditional women in some African societies indicates gender victimization and otherness. ‘Otherness’ is, therefore, not alien to their articulation of gender because the women have developed expressions (verbal and non-verbal) for defining separate subordinated selves. Igbo women (Nigeria), for example, verbalize their separateness with the expression, *uwa umu-nwanyi*, which translates as “women’s world”; a term that signifies separation from the main stream which is male. Uniting the two worlds is *uwa aja*,

which translates as “world of nothingness (sand)” and signifies the world of equality of both men and women; an equality that is also expressed in the etymology of the terms **nwa**-anyi (woman) and **nwa**-oke (man), which have the same root, **nwa**. The term *uwa aja* usually surfaces in moments of natural universalizing events such as death and natural disaster while *uwa umu-nwanyi* resurfaces in moments of women’s feeling of relegation generated when events and situations become gender oppressive as often happens in crop ownership, role sharing, widow’s rites, and kolanut ceremony. Thus, while men and women are united in *uwa aja*, women have an extension, which stemmed from their peripheral location. *Uwa umu-nwanyi* is therefore comparable, though not analogous, to Beauvoir’s “Otherness” through its expression of difference and marginality.

In 1984, a group of women from Amuvi village (Arochukwu in Abia, Nigeria) visited a woman who had abandoned her marital home where she felt victimized and returned to her natal home. It was a context for sharing women’s marital experiences. Some of the questions about women’s relegation were explained with reference to *uwa umu-nwanyi*, which after some time began to sound like a refrain. The following poem written by Okafor after the event encapsulates the significance of *uwa umu-nwanyi*:

Why Chain Me?

Why chain me to the hearth while brother skips?
 Don’t worry, child, you will learn in doses.
 And you work the hearth that my sire rules.
 Don’t worry, child, you will learn in doses.

The head burns, my mother, it makes my bowel boil.

Bind bitterness, my child, they are not to blame.

Who is to blame that I man the man and mind the home?

as is the lot of married women, I know.

Who is to blame that I seek surety and ache for the mark

that is the wish of married women I know.

Who is to blame that I fear the entry of another wife,

as is the lot of married women I know.

The answer stares at you in our songs

It rubs your mouth with women's tales

It crawls around your hearth and fields,

even in sweet thrashing of fecundity.

Uwa umu nwanyi uwa umu nwanyi uwa umu nwanyi...

World of women world of women world of women...

The above poem delineates women's separateness in various activities rooted in women's nurturing and care of the world ruled by men (*I man - take care of - the man*) and vocalized in women's orature. Like Beauvoir's Otherness that articulates gender objectification, *uwa umu-nwanyi* delineates women's otherness and comes to the fore in moments of stress. It seems to express without offering any explanation for the relegation. It seems to underscore the kind of acceptance encoded in the expression, "women's lot." It indeed encodes separateness, otherness, not on the horizontal level of equivalence but on the vertical gradation in which women occupy the lower level as well as the spherical in which they occupy the margins. But *uwa umu-nwanyi* is not just a verbal expression of resignation. Its expression of resistance lies in its definition of positionality, recognition of separateness, unfairness, and oppositional stance against that which it defines. It signifies marginality, unfairness and lack of power. It can be a space for the

articulation of strategy and campaign against its existence. But this space has not been used adequately to restructure women's space. Perhaps contemporary feminism needs to explore the possibilities of the expression as part of its strategy in tackling the layered relegation of contemporary African women who have been "de-womanized" (Sofola, 1998: 52).

BOPOTO

If *uwa umu-nwanyi* verbally defines woman's separateness, *bopoto* of Shona women (Zimbabwe) theatrically engages subordination. It shows how a woman can use her relegation to undermine the order of "man's world" through subversion of language. *Bopoto* takes the form of a woman contravening the normal order of communication by remaining silent or making noise. The action takes various forms depending on the predilection of the oppressed subject. Rebellion is the basis on which the woman builds subversive behavior such as silence, refusing to cook for the family, refusing to eat food and exposing her legs. This action can go on for hours or days depending on other factors such as the input of the oppressive agent(s) and members of the society who interject as spectators. The performance requires spectators for its effectiveness even while a solution is being sought. *Bopoto* is a statement, a revolt and an empowering agent.

Bopoto is a reaction against what Beauvoir delineates as 'Otherness.' It is a theatrical language that relies on the gestural rather than linguistic although the linguistic can be part of it. Its power derives from the absurdist language of opposition. It is a challenge. It is a weapon made up of elements that are considered absurd in the patriarchal order of the homestead but which reflects the absurdity of the woman's marginalized space. Subversion becomes a huge expression of the

absence of a woman's voice, acknowledgment or significance. What she should have been but which she is not because of her subordination is dramatized through her action or more appropriately orchestrated 'non-action.' In the brief moment (compared to her whole life of marginalization), she becomes the center of attention and control. Everybody pleads for her voice, her normalcy and restoration of normalcy to the patriarchal order that keeps her politically silent. They want to hear her voice for its input in the smooth running/labor of the homestead. Her voice becomes a relevant political voice. When she finally speaks, everybody listens to her complaint that elicits urgent rectification.

Like *uwa umu-nwanyi*, *bopoto* would require some expansion in order to reorganize the patriarchal space. One must appreciate the limitations of women's use of their positionality in the margin to galvanize for feminist struggle. As Beauvoir noted, unlike other oppressed groups such as blacks or Jews, women do not constitute a homogenous group. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own; they have no such solidarity of work and interest as that of the proletariat (Beauvoir, 1980: 47). In spite of this, women have mobilized on matters that were of common interest affecting them as a group and achieved successes. Igbo women, for example, organized and fought the colonial regime, making the government accept defeat and not only rescind its decree but shift its base from Calabar to Lagos (Van Allen, 1976: 65). The fear generated by the *Odide*'s (old women) threat to mobilize and walk naked on the streets forced the military governor of Bendel (Nigeria) to rescind its decree on school fees in 1985. In Kenya, women mobilized and protested against abuse of human rights in the government of Arap Moi in 1992. These mobilizations do not center on feminist struggle but they have feminist value, which signal their possibility for feminist struggle. In addition to uniting in order to pursue a common

interest, women have also united with men on basis of common history, religion or political goal. Women's power was mobilized in various wars of liberation in Africa. However, the struggles frequently restore the patriarchal power that leave the women in their marginalized position (Arnfred, 1988:10. Aina, 1998: 73). Perhaps one should not only focus on the possibilities of galvanizing women but also on the probability of cross-gender partnership in furthering women's struggle. The strategy of gender partnership in the liberation struggles does not incorporate feminist concern and therefore should not weaken the desire for a mobilization with feminist agenda. The war of gender fairness or reconstruction has not been fought. In fact the complementarity of the sexes expressed in African world-view, which support cross-gender mobilization, should be explored in feminist struggle. Mindful of the reluctance of the empowered to relinquish power, mobilization of African men for feminist struggle requires long-term education in a broad sense. The women who have been socialized to see patriarchy as the norm also need re-education.

WRITTEN LITERATURE

The role of literature in encoding and disseminating images and paradigms makes it pivotal in feminist discourse and struggle. Starting from Nwapa mentioned earlier, modern African literature has a record of insurgency and feminism. Positioned in *uwa-umu-nwanyi* and with an insider's view, Nwapa is able to explore that world in an innovative manner. Her earliest novel, *Efuru*, published in 1966, installed the female voice and communicates the woman's personality that contravenes the earlier depiction of docility and subservience in most of the novels written

by men. Nwapa “Bared the soul of the woman, she showed her as flesh and blood nursing her own dreams and aspirations” (Chukwuma, 1994: 115). To appreciate her innovation, one needs to understand that the female voice was excised at the birth of modern African literature. The Arab and European patriarchal order disorganized African political organizations and eroded expressions of women’s leadership and power. The British Victorian sexist ideologies influenced the schools that nurtured contemporary Africans and also subverted women’s traditional autonomy (Amadiume, 1989:136. Okonjo, 1976: 55-65). Mystical discourse, which in Africa, as in European history, gives women voice and public attention (Moi, 1985:136) suffered from the colonial onslaught. The refusal of the colonial government to recognize “female priesthood and other expressions of female leadership relegated women to the background” (Jell-Bahlsen, 1988:110).

The erosion of women’s power was not only in political and religious spheres. The precursor of the modern female literary voice also suffered. The vigorous and visible presence of women artists such as the griots of Senegal and Gambia as well as the female poet-singers of pre-Islamic Hausa land, spanning many areas in the northern part of West Africa, diminished (Mark, 1986: 181). The contemporary patriarchal organization with its new structures of male empowerment in education and politics gave the male added prominence and power and exacerbated the woman’s problems by pushing her further down the valley of subordination. The complementarity of African worldview supported an orature that represented the social reality of a world peopled by men and women of various power complexities. It represented female power even though it also represented female relegation. It accommodated both male and female bards and voices in oral literature. But at birth, modern African literature excluded the female bard and her voice. Thus,

the duality in literary production whereby male and female poets flourished, had no equivalent at the birth of written African literature since the female bard became not just the 'other' but the silenced voice. The literature of duality whereby male and female perspectives were portrayed also disappeared. Written literature became the prerogative of men and this resulted in a literature that deprived women of balance and power in portraiture. Male-centered literature was popularized in schools as the counter to Eurocentric views and therefore has become entrenched as popular literature. By the time women writers joined the writing arena, the male voice had become the standard and the female had been relegated as the insignificant 'other.' Male authors constitute the standard for canonization and criticism while the female is the "other" that is occasionally remembered in 'special numbers' (Strantton, 1994:4).

Women writers regained their voice in literature largely through the inspiration of available literature written by men. Cyprian Ekwensi's *When Love Whispers* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* were the first African-authored books read by Flora Nwapa and they made a great impression on her. In fact, Chinua Achebe patronized her first publication, *Efuru* (Nwapa, 1998:90). Thus, the mother metaphorically gave birth to *Efuru* through the input of the father, Achebe. Like Achebe, Nwapa uses the traditional Igbo setting and modes of meaning supplied by Igbo culture and language of her origin. This has generated heated charges by Taiwo who accuses her of imitating Achebe's generation of male writers (Taiwo, 1986: 138) and defense by Oha who clarifies the issue through the use of the idea of otherness by seeing the accusation as a "phallogocentric critical perspective, in which the male writer is taken as the standard, from which the female can only be deviant" (Oha, 1997: 107). Achebe's influence in African literature including Nwapa's novels is indisputable. Nwapa acknowledges links with Achebe while also

affirming her knowledge of the limitations of Achebe's early works that "played down the powerful role of women" (Nwapa, 1998: 92). Achebe's works are obvious classics but a feminist reading reveals that the women of his early novels are "peripheral to the larger exploration of man's experience" (Davies 1986: 247). A proper understanding of Nwapa is, therefore, not necessarily through affinities with Achebe but within the context of her work rooted in the same Igbo culture as Achebe; a culture with a history of feminist assertiveness as well as the female marginal space often articulated as *uwa umu-nwanyi* and a culture that influenced her pioneering venture as a feminist writer.

Beauvoir's theory of 'Otherness' helps us to clarify Nwapa's struggle to destroy the relegated space of the woman and place her at the center. Having read literature that misrepresented gender, Nwapa had to initiate the process of digging the mountain of myths and misrepresentations covering the African woman. The statement of her intention in writing *Efuru* is illuminating: "all my thoughts led me to the African woman" (Nwapa, 1998:93). Through *Efuru*, Nwapa dislodges the marginalization of women by creating a central character that is a woman and using her to explore women's life from a woman's perspective. Her literary contribution is a subversive literature that attacks malecentric views of women as inferior beings. It is not an overt attack but a protest embedded in the act of contradiction, that is, the balanced representation of the positive and negative, the submissive and powerful. The heroine, Efuru in *Efuru*, goes through gender oppressions that delineate her marginalized space in *uwa umu-nwanyi*. She goes through marriage and infertility. She gossips, suffers and hurts but she does not allow the stress of *uwa umu-nwanyi* to crush her will. From her location in the marginal space, she launches to the center by using her ability as a person to struggle and empower herself. In

Cassava Song and Rice Song Nwapa tries to relocate women's crop, cassava, from the margins to the center. Cassava is relegated while yam, which is men's crop, is elevated through orature and festival performance. Nwapa uses the mock-epic style of neo-classical English tradition to centralize cassava. The intention is to elevate womanhood through the inscription of the positive on the crop by the poetic enumeration of its versatility and prominence that dwarfs all other crops including yam, the Igbo symbol of masculinity. This is a struggle against myths of subordination of women, against the woman's position as the insignificant 'Other.'

Nwapa's struggle to attack the inferior 'otherness' ascribed to women in African literature has influenced many of her young contemporaries directly and indirectly (Okafor, 1997: 81-82). The Zimbabwean writer, Sekai Nzenza Shand does not acknowledge Nwapa in her bag of influences. She is, however, linked with Nwapa through their connection with Chinua Achebe whose influence she acknowledges as well as her insider's perspective in Shona theatrical equivalence of "uwa umu-nwanyi." Her first novel, *Zimbabwean Woman: My Own Story* converges with Nwapa's *Efuru* in exploring the joys, fears, trials, failure and successes of a young woman in a traditional setting. *Songs to An African Sunset* also recalls Nwapa in its invocation of rural life and centralization of the female voice. Her style is autobiographical as she follows the women to traditional ceremonies, church, farm, listening to their conversations and eavesdropping when necessary in order to reveal the public and private, the overt and covert in the life of the women. What Banyiwa-Horne says of Nwapa's *Efuru* easily fits into a description of Nzenza-Shand's *Songs*: "Her novel is filled with daily conversation mainly of women.... The constant banter of women reveals character as much as it paints a comprehensive, credible, social canvas ..." (Banyiwa-Horne, 1986:121).

Nzenza-Shand uses a first person viewpoint, which enables the narrator to act as a participant-observer who contributes to conversations and critiques the events as they unfold. It is a panoramic view that enables her to depict a multiplicity of events loosely held together by the narrator whose main interest is in recording and connecting with village life. Dominating the events is the narrator's mother, Mmai, who recalls Ramatoulaye of Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* who became an empowered matriarch at husband's death. Mmai directs the affairs of her homestead and holds an important political-cultural position in her natal home. Through flashback, we are able to appreciate that her dominance developed from a background of struggle in the marginal space comparable to *uwa umu-nwanyi*. She is, however, able to turn this space into a subversive weapon by staging a noisy *bopoto* that forced her oppressor to retreat. Her traditional *bopoto* is a contrast to Rozina's, which is impacted by the tussle between traditional and modern attitudes. Rozina's *bopoto* is used to question polygamy in a traditional setting threatened by modernity, economic depression and the spread of AIDS. It is used to examine the use of *bopoto* for women's struggle in a setting that is no longer strictly traditional. Rozina's *bopoto* fails because the traditional structures are not in accord with the changing society with modern attitudes. Thus, although there is power in *bopoto*, the relevance of its traditional form in a modern setting is queried in the novel.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has shown that the idea of otherness, whether conceptualized as Beauvoir's theory of objectification, the marginalized space that Igbo women call *uwa umu nwanyi* or the Shona *bopoto* that dramatizes woman's power at the edge of the margin, is relevant in clarifying issues of relegation and positionality in the literature written by African women. Beauvoir's theory, the Igbo defining terminology and Shona theatrical structure developed from patriarchal systems and are able to define women's space in a world that constructs an 'other' or extra world for women. Literature written by African women also engages women's space and intersects with other feminist forms irrespective of background. The construction of women's marginal space is universal and very old. According to Beauvoir, women have always been subordinated to men throughout history. It is the task of all who are concerned about oppression to tackle gender with the same fervor and empathy given to class, race and other forms of oppression. Beauvoir, however, has pointed at the difference between both class and race on one hand and gender subordination on the other hand. The former have incidental nature of historical occurrence and contingency, which gender lacks. Nevertheless, the commonality of experience and goal is a force that binds women and should be employed in feminist struggle. Women's world in the margin - be it in the domestic or public sphere - constitutes a subversive space for campaign against marginalization. The space provides a veritable weapon as demonstrated by the feminist literature and gender action discussed but it is important to realize that as old weapons of struggle become inadequate for the restrengthened patriarchal relegation in the modern society, new weapons must be developed in the struggle.

This discussion shows that the place of Beauvoir in African literature is not clearly defined. It is possible to argue for influence in the convergences between the works of African women writers and Beauvoir's theory. However, the connection of the works with traditional African structures of women's space, relegation and power shows the works' affinity with African roots and therefore suggests a case of parallelism with Beauvoir. The education of the women with Western-style curriculum and their exposure to Western feminism through travel to Europe and America where some of Beauvoir's and the later feminists' works have influenced feminist thinking, nevertheless, makes it possible to imply indirect inspiration from Beauvoir. An indisputable fact emerging from this discussion of the traditional women's concept of *uwa umu-nwanyi*, the use of otherness to stage *bopoto*, the works of Nwapa and Nzenza-Shand as well as Beauvoir's theory is the intersection of women's marginalization and struggle irrespective of background, class and race. It also shows that Beauvoir's theory of 'Otherness' can provide a clarifying pedestal on which to hang and scrutinize African examples. The relevance of the theory of otherness in examining marginal spaces is indisputable.

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