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2ND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

THE FEDERAL POLYTECHNIC, ILARO

10TH – 11TH NOVEMBER, 2020

THE 21ST CENTURY NIGERIAN WOMEN AND MARITAL CHALLENGES IN CHIKA UNIGWE'S *NIGHT DANCER*

Abstract

Nigerian women writers at home and in the diaspora have been presenting contemporary women against the background of the traditional representation of women. Chika Unigwe is one of the contemporary Nigerian women writers who have been re-imaging women within the context of modernity and civilisation. Unigwe's *Night Dancer* is a novel which presents 21st Century female characters who find it difficult to remain in marriage. The novel's thematic focus interrogates women's status in marriage and society, through the characters of Adanna, Ezi and Rapu. The representation of these women reveals that 21st Century society has evolved with different perceptions and understandings of marriage and marital issues. The content analysis of the novel with the tenets of radical feminism reveals that Unigwe intones that men will always be men and women will always be women no matter the situation. The Twenty-first Century women, through education and modernity, have found it difficult to come to terms with some experiences in their marriages and for this reason, most of them become frustrated and unsatisfied with their respective marriages.

Key words: Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*, 21st Century marriage, characterisation in *Night Dancer*, women and family disintegration

Introduction

The 21st Century novel tradition has witnessed robust thematic foci and thus deviating from the pioneer themes of cultural renaissance, racial and gender inequality as well as oppression. Among the new foci of the 21st Century novel is intra-gender and inter-gender conflicts and how women have been problematizing family and home management. This new focus,

perhaps, is an attempt of these 21st Centuries women writers to re-interrogate ender relations and how this has been influencing marital lives of some women in the contemporary society.

Before the emergence of this new trend in the thematic focus of the 21st Century, Nigerian women writers such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta and by extension, African writers such as TsiTsi Danarengba and Nawal El Saadawi have been focusing the themes of their texts on male-female oppression and societal subjective misrepresentation of women status. The pioneer Nigerian women writers overtly blame tradition, culture and defective ender socialisation for the dehumanisation women were subjected to in the country. Instances of this argument can be found in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. In these novels, women protagonists are relegated to the state of voicelessness and facelessness. This thematic focus began to change with post-colonial transformation which promotes enlightenment and modern civilisation among women. With enlightenment and education, women writers see ender relations beyond the scope of male-female oppression. To this end, the 21st Century Nigerian women writers begin to question the rationality behind gender conflicts among men and women as well as intra-gender conflicts among women.

The pioneer Nigerian women writers linked the gender inequity that women face in society with gender socialisation which has become a standard. In this gender socialisation, men are at the centre of attention while women are at the margin. The traditional gender socialisation, which marginalised women in socio-cultural matrix of things, has been captured in Imoh Abang Emenyi's view that:

In essence, male and female children are socialised differently: the former is groomed to be a conqueror while the latter is trained to serve his needs. The prominence given to male traits and attributes that are positively valued has culminated in the institutionalisation of male dominance. The female is planted in domestic space as a wife and mother...

The traditional gender socialisation, as it is generally believed, has been represented in literary texts written by male authors such as Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi. Female writers, arguably, ventured into writing as a rejoinder to how women are presented in the male author texts. The entry of these female writers have witnessed into literary creativity has produced four paradigms of thematic foci. In this line of thought, this paper aligns its position with Yetunde Akorede's (127-128) view that:

The portrayal of female characters in creative works by women writers falls into four categories. The first is seen in works where women are heroines. Examples are Efuru in Nwapa's *Efuru* and Adah in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*. The second category presents women in subsumed roles. An example is Awa; Li's sister, in Zainab Alkali's *The Still Born*. The third presents female characters in what Susan Cornillion (1973: ix-xiii) described as whole people in the process of finding other metaphors for existence. This portrays the female as a person in search of authentic identity for existence. An example is Rama-toulaye in Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Adaku and Nnu-Ego in Emecheta's *The Joy of Motherhood*.

Fourthly, there is the image of the female achiever. One who is determined to achieve, at least as much as men do or even better than the male characters. Examples are in Alkali's *The Still Born*, and Aissatou in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, who goes ahead to forge a new life for herself. She becomes rich enough to give her friend a car as gift.

Of the four thematic paradigms, Unigwe's *Night Dancer* falls in the third and the fourth categories as reflected in the characters of Ezi and her daughter, Adanma.

First published by Parresia in Nigeria in 2013, Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer* addresses gender issues from a fresh perspective with a focus on intra-gender and inter-gender conflicts. The novel opens with Adanma (Nma) battling with the shock which follows the death of her mother Ezi. Before her death, Ezi writes memoirs (series of letters) kept in a box with the instruction that her daughter (Nma) should only open the box and read the memoir only when the mother (Ezi) is dead. While reading the memoir, Nma gets some revelations about her mother. The reading of the memoir also assists Nma to reconcile with some of her maternal relatives (her grandfather and grandmother), her estranged father and her step-mother (Rapu).

Though the novel treats familiar issues in gender issues, its uniqueness of style and narrative synthesis marks it out among some contemporary 21st Century novels. This narrative synthesis and uniqueness of style, perhaps, contributes to the novel's success as the winner of 2012 NLNG prize for literature. Despite that the novel won NLN G prize for literature, *Night Dancer* has not enjoyed much patronage of literary critics. This situation notwithstanding, it is necessary to review few available critiques of the novel. Cristina Cruz- Gutierrez's Inflecting mind/body dialectics: Self – emancipation through insubordination in Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer* critiques the novel from feminist perspective. The critic puts the novel in the category of third generation of Nigerian women writers. The critic further argues that the

novel, through the characterisation of Ezi, dares patriarchal socio-cultural structure which places limitations on women and the exercise of their natural rights. Cruz- Gutierrez, therefore, concludes that:

The novel depicts unigwe's rejection of the mind/body dichotomy by relating it to Ezi's commodification of her body, and to her engagement with and refusal of intergenerational discourses inscribing female bodies within epistemological nationalist discourses.

Cruz- Gutierrez, however, fails to situate the novel within Ezi's marital negligence and this (the negligence) has affected the social, psychological and emotional development of her only daughter, Nma. Though the critic makes reference to the infraction of patriarchal norms, there is no specific reference to radical feminism as a theoretical model.

Ignatius Chukwumah critiques the novel from the perspective of trauma and the quest for identity under discomfoting circumstances. Chukwumah argues that while Nma relives her traumatic childhood memory alongside her mother's status as a single mother in a patriarchal society, she comes to the understanding that an unmarried woman or a divorcee has no respect in a patriarchal society. The critic concludes that "*Night Dancer* opens up a new chapter of postcolonial woman in African literature".

Adedapo Olumuyiwa Atoyebi's PhD thesis, "*Gender Discourse Shift and Intra-Gender Conflicts in Contemporary African Novels*" devoted a chapter to the critique of Unigwe's *Night Dancer*. In the said chapter, Atoyebi critiques the novel (*Night Dancer*) along Violet Burugi's *Cassandra* to discuss the intra-gender and inter-gender conflicts which are inherent or explicitly presented in the novel (s). In his critique of the novel, Atoyebi places less emphasis on marital issues and family disintegration. Besides, the critic adopts Marxist feminism while critically engaging the novel.

These previous works on Unigwe's *Night Dancer* reveals that much can still be done in the re-reading of the novel. This is because "a literary text does not have an invariable interpretation and meaning" (Azeez Akinwumi Sesan, 76). The effort of this paper to do a re-reading of the novel (*Night Dancer*) along women's marital experiences in the 21st Century is also motivated by Trisnawati's (4) view that "in literature along with its various genres, each genre is actually dedicated to its readers, and those readers may bring various roles to a literary work".

Marital Negligence and Family Disintegration

Considering the excruciating experience of Nma while growing up in the care of a single mother (Ezi), this paper avers that the separation between Ezi and Mike is a sort of family disintegration which affects the mental, social and psychological development of Nma. Thus, Nma is seen as a victim of her mother's marital negligence. This paper claims that Ezi is negligent with her marriage considering how she manages the home before Rapu's arrival as a house maid and later as a rival wife. The subsequent and sudden decision of Ezi to leave her marriage marks the height of radical feminist position that women should quit a marriage which is no longer conducive either through divorce or separation. Ezi's decision to leave her marriage with Mike is, therefore, consistent with Florence Stratton's (147) position that:

Living in bondage to men, but desiring to live freely and fully, they are bewildered by, or seethe with inner rage at their servitude to a structure of values matched to the needs of others... They are *schizophrenic*, their personalities fragmented by their desire both to accept and reject their conditions.

The above quote aptly describes Ezi's personality as represented in the novel. She lives a modern life of typical 21st Century women who believe in absolute comfort in marriage. Ezi's radicalist posture is also revealed in the novel when she informs Mike her ideology of marriage. Ezi wants marriage as a matter of necessity and to fulfil the will of her parents. The following novel excerpt reveals thus:

When Ezi met Mike, she liked to say, she had not been looking for a husband. She was not like one of those women who measured their worth by the ease with which they snagged a husband. She had had big plans; ambitions her parents were convinced were not desirable in a girl. An education was good, they agreed but they came secondary to a husband. 'After all', her mother said, 'everyone knows that girls go to university to find husbands, not to chase away men who approached them. (*Night Dancer*, 171)

Through the excerpt, one can infer that Ezi is not ready for marriage. To her, marriage is not significant in a woman's life in as much such woman can have at least a child that can be raised as a single mother.

Like some 21st Century women, Ezi leaves the total care of the house in the hands of Rapu, the housemaid. This recklessness affords Rapu the opportunity to graduate from the status of

housemaid to a rival wife of Ezi. Rapu's principal, Ezi, carelessly leaves cooking and other house chores in Rapu's care, a typical characteristic of some 21st Century Nigerian women. This lopsided arrangement by Ezi in the care the home makes Rapu have the mind-set of being the one in care of the home affairs. As the novel captures the situation,

Sometimes she felt like the mistress of the house. She had complete dominion over everything that mattered, everything that made one a wife: she cooked, she cleaned. And it was she who Uncle Mike called if he needed anything. Her mother would be proud of her. She had made herself indispensable.

With Rapu's liberty to do "everything that made one a wife", she was able to gain Mike's attention. Though not categorically stated in the novel, Ezi might have been denying her husband access to sexual intercourse with her. Rapu, whose intention is to take over the home, based on her mother's counsel, might have been a ready alternative in the satisfaction of Mike's sexual urge.

When Rapu becomes pregnant, Ezi finds it difficult to cope with the overwhelming reality of being in a polygamous home. Ezi forgets that her traditional Igbo culture encourages polygamy. She is, however, influenced by the mentality of 21st Century Nigerian women who believe in 'one man, one wife'. She only has two options – to cope with the polygamous situation or quit the marriage. On her part, Ezi opts for the latter option. In this line of thought, this paper aligns its thought with Atoyebi's that:

There are two options available to a woman in polygamy: endure or quit. Ezi opts for the second option because she does not have the will power to endure the heat of polygamy. Her desertion of her marriage without any hope of reconciliation labels her as stubborn. She is resolute on the fact that she will not return to her marriage with Mike. For this reason, she is not moved by whatever is said or done to make her have a change of mind to return to Mike. (71)

By opting for the second option, Ezi demonstrates her modern orientation which frowns at polygamy despite her limitations.

With her action, she has not properly upheld the principles of radical feminists, who by indications are not hardened men-haters. It is necessary to evaluate the radical feminist ideology in relation to and in the context of Ezi and Rapu's attitude to their respective marriages. Radical feminism, as a theory and practice, in western and European countries was

promoted by Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). Firestone's book negates Valerie Jean Solana's view in her book, *Scum Manifesto* where she claims that radical feminists have unflinching stance to sever all relationships with men. Firestone (11) clearly states that "the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: general differences between human beings would no longer matter naturally". With Firestone's position, radical feminists demonstrate understanding that each gender has its permissible strengths and limits. To them, marriage is one of the thresholds which offer some sex and gender roles. Ezi, in the novel, fails to uphold radical feminists' ideologies. This is because she intentionally to deviate from the established gender norms which dictate responsibilities and personality in marriages.

Unigwe validates her position on radical feminist ideology with the parallel creation of Rapu as alternative woman who understands the workings of marriage within a specific cultural code in Nigeria. Rapu understands that she is able to overthrow Ezi as Mike's wife because of the latter marital negligence. For this reason, she does everything within her power to protect her marriage to this extent that she

... guarded her home with a ferociousness that her husband had not suspected that she had. When she eventually got a maid, she would not let her cook nor serve Mike's food. She insisted on doing that herself. (*Night Dancer*, 204)

The characterisation of Rapu within the above context reveals that Unigwe has not been totally severed from the culture and tradition of her indigenous people. Unwritten cultural convention upholds that women should attend to the domestic needs of their husbands and children. 21st Century [Nigerian] women, however, maintain radical postures that the work at the domestic fronts should be shared between them and their husbands. These 21st Century women see marriage as bondage and the only thing they desire in marriage is to have at least a child that they will raise as a single mother. This is exact representation of Ezi in *Night Dancer*. Unlike Ezi, Rapu is prepared to fight out her survival in the marriage with Mike. She does everything to ensure that she is not edged out of her home by a perceived rival. Rapu's rage does not know any boundary as seen in her vituperation against Mma. During a visit to Mike's house, Rapu attacks Mma as follow:

Whatever I might have been, this is my home and now you'd do well to remember it, young lady. You think you can come in here and hustle your way into the family? Well you are no

match for me. Even your mother was no match for me, as mad as she was.' Her laughter was crazed. (*Night Dancer* 238)

The above shows further that Rapu has zero tolerance for marital negligence in order to protect her marriage from marital disintegration. Unlike modern women who do not show much respect for marriage, Rapu upholds jealously the sacredness of marriage.

With Rapu and Ezi's characterisation, Unigwe re-echoes Helen Chukwuma's view that:

The true test of the woman continues to be the marriage institution. In this closed-in-arena, every married woman is to fight out her survival as individual. The marriage paradox lies in the fact that it is both sublimating and subsuming. Through it a woman attains a status acclaimed by society and fulfils her biological need of procreation and companionship. Through it too, the woman's place of second-rate is emphasized and too easily she is lost in anonymity to the benefit and enhancement of the household.

In Nigerian cultural milieu, marriage is a desirable institution for every woman of marriageable age. A true test of womanhood and motherhood is in marriage. This is why the culture advocates tolerance and complementarity in marriage. Ezi wants to have a child but does not want to be under the control of a man. Ezi's decision to quit her marriage makes her incur the wrath of her parents and siblings. Rapu, on the other hand, is consistent with cultural codes which stipulate that women and men should respect their limits in consistence with their respective gender roles. Ezi fails the test and that is why she is ostracised by her people and society. Ezi's situation becomes worsened when she lives as a single mother in Lagos. Every parent avoids Ezi and warns their children not to associate with Mma basing their judgement on Ezi's single motherhood. This development affects Mma psychologically and she lives with this trauma for a very long time till the death and after the death of her mother.

The inference from Ezi's experience as a single mother is that Nigerian society frowns at single motherhood no matter the circumstance. There are some cultural assumptions that a single mother has the propensity to be wayward and uncouth in her thoughts and actions. Unfortunately, some 21st Century Nigerian women do not mind the aspersion the society cast on them following their divorce or separation with their husbands. Despite her strong headedness to leave her marriage despite all entreaties, Ezi secretly regrets her actions. The following excerpt from the novel reveals thus:

I secretly hope that when I am gone, they will hear and be sorry and seek you out. I do not want to think that they have forgotten

all about me, that all the years we spent together as a family means nothing in the face of my decision. (*Night Dancer*, 48)

With the above statement, Ezi foreshadows the possibility of reconciling her daughter, Mma, with her father and maternal grandparents. Eventually, Mma achieves her mother's dream of reconciliation.

Who is to Blame?

For family disintegration, in the form of separation or divorce, most women blame it on men. In their argument, they are always of the view that men are authoritative and uncaring in marriage. The truth of the matter, however, is that men should not bear the blame all alone. Making a marriage work requires collaborative efforts of all the stakeholders – the husband, the wife, the wife's family, the husband's family as well as friends and relatives. Unfortunately, the sanctity of marriage has been upturned by the sophistication of some 21st Century women who parade themselves as society and career women. In this line of argument, this paper, therefore, corroborates Akinbimpe Akintayo Akinyele (74) that:

New values and norms are replacing the old ones; like surrogate motherhood, single parenthood, cohabitation, separation and homosexuality. Some of these alien traditions are gradually becoming the norm in Africa and Nigeria in particular, although homosexuality is not yet openly and officially accepted in most parts of the society.

Commenting further on Akinyele's view, this paper upholds that marital challenges that the contemporary society witnesses is a product of urban dislocation. Our traditional values have been displaced by modernity. This displacement has also affected marriage institution to the extent that high rate of divorce and separation is becoming unbearable. In order to justify their respective [in] actions, the parties in marriage engage in blame game.

In *Night Dancer*, therefore, Ezi blames her husband as the cause of her separation and the eventual status as a single mother. What she fails to understand is that her husband has not committed a very serious crime that could have warranted a separation. Monogamy or polygamy is a matter of choice. From a critical reading of the novel, the paper brings forth the argument that Mike is forced into marrying Rapu as a second wife as a result of Ezi's marital negligence. Apart from negligence, Ezi is also lazy. All she does in the house is to sleep, knit and watch television while Rapu does the cooking, other house chores and the utmost care of

Mike, Ezi's husband. This gives Rapu a good opportunity get access to Mike as she intones in the following excerpt.

Really such laziness, such indolence was unimaginable, even if one did have a maid, Rapu thought. The mistress of the house next door cooked for her husband every single day. And she personally bathed her children before they went to bed no matter how tired she was. Rapu was not complaining, the work was not insurmountable, but a lazy woman only left holes through which her husband could be snatched away from her. Men did not like lazy women. No man did. (*Night Dancer*, 155)

Rapu's prediction comes to pass when Mike begins to have an affair with her. Indeed, Ezi has left a hole for her husband to be taken away from her.

Apart from the fact that Ezi allows a wedge in her marriage, Rapu also comes to the house with the secret intention to become Mike's wife. This secret intention, perhaps, is motivated by the need to improve her economic status and her parent's economic and social status. In her first week in Mike's house, Rapu is carried away by the opulence of the home and begins to see herself as someone in-charge of the estate. She sees Mike's home as her new life. The novel states thus "this was her life now and if she worked hard and stuck at it, she would make her parents enough money to build their own (*Night Dancer*, 153).

Though the novel does not state how Rapu becomes Mike's wife, it is presumed that the whole situation rests on Ezi's marital negligence. This argument is based on the fact that it takes two to love. The love affair between Mike and Rapu may be incidental initially but with Ezi's persistent marital negligence, the love affairs blossom into marriage. This paper hypothetically states that Mike, out of frustration, makes advances to Rapu because

In more specific term, the African culture forbids a woman from making true-love advances to a man she desires, or to express her sexual desires as naturally as it comes. In the African worldview, such is unwholesome, and a woman who does that is tagged a whore, and stigma thereof attending debases her personality and social standing. (Abidemi Olufemi Adebayo, 179)

For Mike to make love/sexual advances to Rapu is conditional. The whole situation is consequent upon Ezi's marital negligence because no man appreciates a lazy and carefree woman. After walking out of her marriage, Ezi is not remorseful to the extent that she tells her daughter, Mma that she does not have a father. In fact, Ezi is the architect of family

disintegration that Mma faces in the novel. This disintegration greatly affects her socially and emotionally. Mma is a victim of her mother's irrationality and radical feminist stance.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the attitude of 21st Century Nigerian women to marriage using Ezi's characterisation in *Night Dancer* as a paradigm. Most of the 21st Nigerian women are career and society women who attach little or no value to marriage. Their philosophy of life is that a woman can live independent of a man as a single mother. Ezi's characterisation in the novel reveals a woman who does not want marriage and at the next available excuse, she leaves the marriage with Mike raising her daughter, Mma all alone. Through that characterisation of Ezi and Rapu, the novel underlines the fact that education brings about philosophical and ideological differences among the 21st Century women. These changes, therefore, influence their attitude to marriage. Ezi is very educated while Rapu has no education at all. The sophistication of Ezi, through her access to university education, is the genesis of the whole conflicts in the novel. She is reckless and incorrigible. It is, however, disheartening that most women in Nigeria's contemporary society blame their marital woes on their husband and in-laws without stating their own faults. This is just the case with Ezi in the novel, *Night Dancer*.

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