

PATRIARCHY AND THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *SOVEREIGN BODY*

ITIVEH JOHN OGHENORO

Department of English and Literary Studies, College of Education, Warri, Delta State, Nigeria

Email: beneltagas@gmail.com

Abstract

In the 1970s, the feminist ideology underwent many different phases in its articulation of its dominant perceptions and has provoked many different thrusts and leanings within its discourse. Despite the foregoing, patriarchy has remained the avowed site and quest for resistance. This paper examines the rhetoric of patriarchy and the quest for freedom in Tanure Ojaide's *Sovereign Body*. Through a critical evaluation, the work unfurls the themes of patriarchy and the redolent quest for freedom by the protagonist, Kemi, who, despite her efforts, rise above the limits presented before her by society, faces traditional and cultural challenges both at the workplace and the home front. Through a critical analysis, the work observes that whether living in the traditional or modern setting, women in Africa often confront a variety of challenges, including space and role limitations, social contradictions, self-disintegration, and cultural infractions. These social and cultural contradictions constitute the thematic goals of Ojaide's *Sovereign Body*. The womanist variant of the feminist approach to literature, which is designed to cater for the needs and yearnings of all women of African descent, is applied to determine the indices of patriarchy and the quest for freedom in the work. Through this approach, the study offers insight into various dimensions of the African women's perception of themselves and their roles in society. In effect, they no longer focus on narrow definitions of women as victims but rather in liberated lights, taking steps towards self-definition and self-determination to change their lives and circumstances. The article concludes that Ojaide's *Sovereign Body* played a key role in advancing the quest for freedom in the discourse of African literature.

Keywords: Women, Freedom, Cultural Infractions, Patriarchy, Society, Resistance

Introduction

The sensibility of the modern Nigerian woman has been shaped by the positions they have been accorded in text and influences occasioned by male dominance in all facets – social, cultural, political, economic and historical – of their lives. Many critics, male and female, have reacted to feminism negatively with suspicion, rejection, and outright denigration. Hence, since the 1960s, women and their roles in the society have been on the front burner of literary discourse. There

have been discourses and counter-discourses on the position of women in society in texts and critical studies. These discourses have either vehemently affirmed or discarded the subject matter, ‘womanhood’. This, therefore, implies that women's issues have emerged as providing significant perspectives in African literary scholarship. Prior to the mid-sixties, male issues mainly dominated the field of literary criticism and imaginative literature, while women were being presented as objects that were marginal to the central themes. Kolawole (1998) lends credence to this portrayal of women when she avers that before the 60s, “women are presented as tragic heroines unable to speak from the subaltern position” (p.228). Frank (1984) sums up the above impression when she declares that,

Until the present moment..., African literary studies have been an almost exclusively masculine domain, largely because the scholars and critics who have mapped it out are nearly all men, who have tended to ignore the admittedly small but still significant number of African women writers and women-related issues in African literature (p.35)

In recent years, women are increasingly mindful of the need to create and secure personal space, decide whether or not they want to be married or have children and generally take part in affairs in which they, as individuals, are to be involved in by making their options and voices heard on such matters in what Kathy Ferguson termed “praxis feminism”. According to her,

Praxis feminism is a subject-centred discourse that privileges the female speaking subject. It seeks a proper understanding of women's lives, and of the world women and men inhabit, in the words that women have to say. The possibilities for political change that it embraces are generated out of women's words and women's world (23).

Nigerian female writing has come a long way in recreating women's image and personality. It has agitated on behalf of women for fair and equal treatment as men through their imaginative works. Most female writers do this under the umbrella movement known as Feminism. This movement aims to redress many of the perceived injustice done to women through the negative portrayal of their characters in texts and contexts. It is a movement that protests female oppression by their male counterparts in the form of patriarchal norms.

This view seems germane because, since primordial times, women have always suffered many hardships, marginalization, and oppression from the family circle, to the public spheres, and this is because they are considered inferior to men. Some practices that best explain this include: preference for male children, discrimination against girls in sharing of family properties, burden of household work on women and young girls, wife battering, male dominance over women and girls, sexual harassment, male control over women's bodies and sexuality. These practices are present in virtually every ethnic nationality in Africa. So, women have been treated as second-class citizens and sexual objects from primordial times till date. Such positions, since

the inception of women's writing, have drawn critical attention to gender issues in Nigerian feminist writings. This view is explicitly captured by Bryce (2008) thus:

Since the 1980s, African women's writing has achieved a level of visibility where it is no longer possible to ignore it or pretend it does not exist, as testified by the increase in critical attention. (p. 50)

It therefore means that feminist discourse probes diverse aspects of women's experiences and realities with the intent of raising societal consciousness to the ills of women's marginalisation and maltreatment. It will not be out of place, therefore, to say that Nigerian feminist works emerge from the necessity of introducing female viability into the socio-cultural and political vision of Nigeria. Through their writings, they tackle issues related to the subjectivity of Nigerian women. It is thus against the foregoing that this essay attempts an evaluation of the burden of patriarchy and the quest for freedom in Tanure Ojaide's *Sovereign Body*. This is done with a view to examining how the text redefines the woman's roles back in the home front and the workplace against the overbearing burden of male chauvinistic tendencies in the Nigerian society. In this way, the study foregrounds the utilitarian value of literature in advocating change for women in areas of subordination, search for identity, oppression, marginalisation and stereotypical structures that restrict and confine them to the position of second-class citizens. It also attests to the potency of the arts in shaping society and putting it on the right path.

Tanure Ojaide is unarguably one of the finest Nigerian writers who not only writes to protest the exploitation and marginalisation of people of the Niger Delta but also advocates, in many of his works, a social order where women can find their voice in a male-dominated society. As a writer, he is noted for his unique stylistic vision and for his intense criticism of imperialism, religion, and other issues. He is regarded as a socio-political and an eco-centric poet. Ojaide has published over three dozen poetry collections, including novels and short story collections.

The Praxis of Patriarchy and the Quest for Freedom in Ojaide's *Sovereign Body*

Patriarchy and the quest for freedom, in recent years, have dominated the discourse of modern Nigerian literature. Many of these pieces of literature demonstrate how women negotiate their space within such constraints. Ojaide's *Sovereign Body* thus exemplifies that quest to resist all forms of societal impediments against the woman. As a male voice, Ojaide employs his creative acumen in redefining womanhood. In *Sovereign Bodies*, for instance, Ojaide vehemently crusades against forces and factors that relegate women to the background in post-independence Nigerian society. What Ojaide has done with this novel, therefore, is to use the determination of the protagonist, Anna to subvert the age long tradition on discrimination against female educational aspiration, especially in their husband's house. Anne in the novel, is a graduate and a lecturer at The State Polytechnic, Barkin Ladi and this shapes her perception and approach to male chauvinism. She sees the society as working against women by setting a very high standard

for them to attain without physical and emotional support. On her first day at work, she noted thus:

I started work within two weeks of the successful interview. To my dismay, the female lecturers at The State Polytechnic, Barkin Ladi, were very few, indeed, only seven of us out of more than eighty lecturers. And four of us were from the State. Why this gender imbalance? What inhibited our women from going to school? Or, if they did go, why did they not aspire to higher degrees and teach in polytechnics and universities? Of the four of us from the State, I was the only one with a Ph.D degree; another had Ed.D. in Physics, and the other two had M.Ed. in Mathematics and Chemistry, respectively (p.45).

Her observation significantly foregrounds the thematic preoccupation of the text. As the story progresses, we find the resilient efforts put up by Anna to break free from patriarchal oppression and prejudices. In this novel, Anna, a bright poet and academic, faces crushing marriage problems when her doctor husband abandons his practice and waits for a political appointment which does not come. As Anna finds home more oppressive, she turns to a professor, a former lover with whom she had severed a relationship upon her marriage. The doctor's mental breakdown and Anna's duty to him make her future uncertain.

Anna's predicament adumbrates the predicament of many women in patriarchal societies where the female child is regarded as a ware which can be discarded at will to anyone who wishes to possess it. This is discernible from her uncle's ideology about the place of women in society when she complains that: "I also felt that Magistrate Obida thought that women, including his wife and me, were to be controlled. Women, to him, had to be led; they had to be repeatedly told simple things that men could do without instructions" (p.7). Thus, as a young girl, she is betrothed to Nathan Goomsay, who has got scholarship to study medicine abroad. She is never allowed to explore the world and make a choice on whom to fall in love with. Like a lamb, she is to be led to any man whom she must love unconditionally, even if she is not loved in return. Despite this societal inhibition towards the aspiration of the female child. She is determined to make things work in her husband's house. In marriage, when things became difficult, she assured herself that she would make the marriage work. She believes and avers that:

Love could be promoted consciously, if it was not there initially or naturally. I was ready to love him and be loved by him, but the effort had to be made. I wanted my children to have their parents together. Seeing those babies gradually becoming men was a great pleasure to me. I believe he was also pleased about the growth of the children. I suspected that most marriages had problems, and separating was an easy way to avoid difficult problems. How I wish things would improve between Nathan and me! (p.57).

However, despite her efforts to see that the marriage works, Nathan, her doctor husband, became a torment in her life. But through her educational exposure, she can stand up to her

husband, when the need arises, and survive the crises of a bad marriage. She refuses to succumb to her husband's insecurity and jealousy. Thus, when she finds home more oppressive, she turns to Jo, her professor and former lover with whom she had severed a relationship upon her marriage. Her letter to Jo expresses this mode succinctly, thus:

...I have reached a point in my unpleasant marriage life that I have decided once and for all to strip and purge myself of any material and emotional attachment to this unpleasant experience that is marriage" (p.101).

Her stoic decision to revisit Jo, howbeit through correspondence and exchange of their creative works as a means to find solace and inner peace, only demonstrates her feminist strength and presents female education as a tool for liberation from the hard grip of male chauvinism and prejudices. Through this artistic representation of the female will, Ojaide therefore subscribes to Nkechi Okoli's claim (2008, P.31-32) that "the education of the female liberates them from the shackles of abuse, oppression, poverty, exclusion, harmful cultural practices and culturally based limitations on their rights. Education elevates the female to the state of being a partners in progress with men instead of continuing as a "liability". This assertion tallies with Chioma Opara's (2004) views that "simply put, female education is projected as the fillip to economic empowerment, which is starkly contrasted with poverty and deprivation" (98).

Elsewhere in the novel, Anna revolts against the patriarchal structure that denies female the choice to follow their heart in choosing the man they love. At the University, Anna had fallen in love with Dr Jo and was ready to do anything with him. In this state, she x-rays the duty inherent in obeying the traditional truce entered on her behalf by her parents to marry a man she is not sure truly loves her and to follow her heart's desire to allow Jo into her life. She said:

I knew I had to make a choice, a hard one.
A choice as to whether I should actually make a choice,
or let things go the way of traditional customs.
Must I follow duty or desire? Could I have both?
Were both duty and desire not meant to fuse in a
relationship? (p.76).

Anna, in the novel, frowns at the patriarchal order that denies women their rights; as such, she embarks on a mission to follow her heart's desire. Although she could not work against marrying Nathan Goomsay when the time to honour the traditional truce of betrothal, she allows herself to be at peace by seeing Jo for the last time before her marriage, even against her uncle's directive. She puts it in her words thus:

Despite my guardian's refusal to let spend the night out,
I knew no matter what happened, that I must go to meet Jo.
I had no doubts in my mind that I would meet him,

even if afterward, I would have to be marched through
the streets of Bukuru as a prostitute for men to pour insults upon.
I had seen such incidents in the village and in town,
but fear of humiliation would not deter me a bit.
Except God, nobody could stop me on this.
I was hell-bent on having my desire however,
others, especially relatives, might perceive my action.
It was time for me to seize what I wanted,
no matter the consequence. In this case,
if I were refused marriage, it would be great relief. (p.13).

Ojaide uses Anna's rebellious action to project his rejection of all traditional entanglement against females by patriarchal structures in African societies. It further foregrounds the futility of trying to cage the female child through betrothal. Hence, Anna does not allow her guardian's stern directive against her move to dampen her resolve to meet with Jo. When she eventually returned in the morning, her guardian did not reprimand her neither was she punished for her decision. She therefore sees herself "as Smoke, she who cannot be contained" (p.13). This captures the resolve, intelligence of the contemporary African woman in manoeuvring situations to sustain their status.

In order to achieve his narrative momentum, Ojaide employs literary tropes to drive home his disavow of patriarchy and other chauvinistic tendencies against women in male-dominated societies. In the novel, for instance, Ojaide narrates the story of Anna and the ordeal that trails her as a young girl placed between her self-will and a custom that tied her to a man through betrothal using the first-person narrative technique. From the way the author describes Anna's ideological stand at the beginning of the story, the readers' mind is subsequently prepared to meet with the character. He begins thus:

If I had to marry him because he felt that he already owned me, I wanted to satisfy myself that his purported ownership of my body was false. I was nobody's chattel slave. My heart belonged to me and was nobody else's property to forcibly take away by right of village tradition, however much I respected my parents and uncles who brought the proposal about. My love had to be earned, not taken for granted (p.5).

The narrator further uses this technique to make the narrative vivid and realistic. It makes the story flows through the mouth of the protagonist in a manner that the readers identify with her inner thoughts and desires. For instance, the protagonist tells the reader after her sexual encounter with Jo that she has to make a choice between being held down by petty tradition or her personal choice of being free. This is captured in the novel thus:

I did not care whether Nathan was still in Kwaton or gone back to Edinburgh. Since he had only one year left in his studies. I knew I had to make a choice, a hard one. A choice as to whether I should actually make a choice, or let things go the way of traditional customs. Must I follow duty or desire? Could I have both? Were both duty and desire not meant to fuse in a relationship? (p.76)

This technique enables the reader to understand the inner workings of the character's mind. At this point, the reader is keen to follow the narrative and see the choice she eventually took. When she eventually chose that of traditional custom by marrying Nathan, her ordeals in the marriage becomes a testament to her fears.

Ojaide also utilises the resources of this technique in Part II of the novel, artistically captioned "Jo". Here, the reader is not only introduced to the emotional sentiments of Jo as a narrator, but also foregrounds a diversion into the story where personal information about Jo is foregrounded. For instance, Jo tells the reader his emotional travails of not hearing from Anna when she went for her National Service. He tells the reader thus:

The moment Annie left for national service, I was thrown into a suffocating void. My sabbatical year was running out, but I still had some time left. She wrote often as soon as she got to the orientation camp, but all of a sudden when she was supposed to be out of the camp, there was no correspondence from her. She last wrote as they were about to be posted to their workplaces in the state (p.78).

Through this narrative technique, the author can reveal personal details of Jo which would not have been possible through the narrative lens of Annie. For instance, Jo is able to reveal information about his family background – his parents, wife and children to Annie through this technique. He informs the reader thus:

I told Annie about my parents and my hometown of Effurun, known for its powerful warriors in the olden days and still fared today by travellers. She wished my parents were still alive from the fond way in which I talked about them... I also told her about Maria, who was in Lagos with the children. (p.89-90)

This technique makes the story to be true as it makes the narrator to achieve significant level of verisimilitude. It enhances the authenticity of the narrative as the events revolve around the personal lives of the characters.

Another literary technique Ojaide employs in the novel is that of simple and straightforward diction. He uses explicit sexual language to drive home her message of advocacy

for women's sexual liberation. In the novel, Ojaide describes, with appropriate diction, the sexual encounter between Annie and Jo. For instance, the author narrates their sexual encounter thus:

We sat for a moment, feeling each other's heartbeat. We stripped. After clasping each other for moments, we were breathing fast with desire. When he entered me, it was so tenderly, our bodies warm and moist. I felt an electric charge as we floated downstream, as if in a dugout for two in a climactic crash into a sea of pleasurable grunts. Each time we came, it was lovely – we cried out and burst into meaningless chants. I wanted rest and dance at the same time; he wanted more. What a communion! (p. 74)

Furthermore, Dr Jo uses amorous language to elevate the status of Annie from an ordinary woman to that of an angel. Having been so glamourised, Annie expresses the effect of Jo's compliments on her thus:

I therefore knew that Jo admired me from his looks and compliments.

“You look exquisite!”

“You are gorgeous!”

“You are angelic!”

“Goddess of the plateau!”

The compliments had gradually elevated me to a divine state (p.68).

The above quote clearly exemplifies the novelist's commitment to present women in their desired status in the society. And this significantly brings joy to the protagonist.

Furthermore, Ojaide artistically creates characters whose conditions reflect real-life situations. The major characters in the novel, Annie, Jo and Nathan give life and meaning to narratives. They are used to convey burning issues pertaining to women. They serve as symbols that show the manner, role and status of everyday people in society. In the novel, for instance, Ojaide, uses Annie to portray the practice of betrothal of young girls into marriages they may not have sanctioned if given the option to choose. The novelist uses her to condemn this form of marriage as it is always in favour of male domination against women. However, through Annie's education and self-will, she is able to rise above the petty customs of her people as she boldly breaks the norm by having an affair with Jo before her marriage with Nathan, her betrothed husband. Through her education, Annie becomes bold, she understands what she wants in a relationship and craves for her heart's desires. She therefore flouts the warning of her guardian in seeing Dr. Jo, who came from Lagos to see her just before her marriage. She tells the reader her stand boldly thus:

I was hell-bent on having my desire however, others, especially relatives, might perceive my action. It was time for me to seize what I wanted, no matter the consequences. In this case, if I were refused marriage, it would be a great relief. I was so confused about everything, including the marriage and my invitation to Jo to visit from Lagos, but now I had to meet him (p.13).

When her marriage with Nathan became toxic, she never capitulated; she took a bold step by walking out of it. She seeks freedom where she can achieve her desire to get to the peak of her lecturing career. She wrote to Jo, thus:

I have reached a point in my unpleasant marriage life that I have decided once and for all to strip and purge myself of any material and emotional attachment to this unpleasant experience that is marriage (p.101).

With this novel, Ojaide offers insight into various dimensions of the African women's perception of themselves and their roles in the society. Here, Annie stood out as a crusader for female education as a prerequisite for her identity and freedom.

Conclusion

Ojaide thus far presents a strong-willed woman in the person of Anna, who understands her identity as a woman who must have a choice in decision-making that affects her life. It is usually believed that women do not partake in the benefits of education, but Annie is learned, and it is through her educational exposure that she can surmount the challenges posed to her and other women by societal structure. It can be argued, therefore, that Ojaide is a committed writer who, through his novels, attempts a vivid representation of the strong-willed African woman with the aim of appreciating women for their unique attributes. He has thus played a key role in advancing the quest for freedom against all forms of patriarchal impediments in society.

References

Bryce, J. (2008). "Half and Half Children: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel". *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 39, 2, pp. 46-67.

Frank, K. (1984). "Feminist Criticism and the African Novel". *African Literature Today*, 14, p. 35

Kolawole, M. E. (1998). *Womanism and African Consciousness*. Trenton, Nj/Asmara: Africa World.

ULM-MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

Vol. 1, No.1, July-Dec. 2025, ISSN: 1595-3548, Email: nepalmultidisciplinaryjournal@gmail.com

Ojaide, T. (2004). *Sovereign Bodies*. Texas: Panther Creek Press

Okoli, N. J. (2008). “Women empowerment: A panacea for poverty alleviation in Africa”.
Journal of Gender Studies. Vol. 5. No. 4. September, 57 – 65.

Opara, C. (2004). *Her Mother’s Daughter: The African writer as woman*. Port Harcourt:
Chanson Press.

Ferguson, K. (1993). *The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory*. Berkeley,
University of California Press.