Arts and the Man
Interpretive Essays on Bode Osanyin
Edited by Duro Oni
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Gender Issues in
Bode Osanyin's Woman

Sola Fosudo

Introduction

Studies in gender theory provide us with facts and criticisms that the interest, which "male feminists" share with their "female counterparts" in the commitment to the struggle against oppressive patriarchal power structures, is suspect. This is so because, it is doubtful if those men as "males" can feel exactly as the "females," i.e., it is unsure if men and women can be feminists in the same way as they express their experiences of the phenomenon of male domination over women. In the words of Toril Moi (1990:135); "Men can be feminists, but they cannot be women." She tries to draw a parallel on this to the struggle against racism by insisting that whites can be anti-racist, but they cannot be black; and so, men do not and cannot really occupy the same position in relation to women on gender sentiments.

To her,

Male feminists cannot simply repeat the words and gestures of female feminists. Speaking as they do from a different position, in a different context, the "same" words, take on different meanings: this is why
the “same,” as many men have experienced, has a
disconcerting tendency to become different (p. 187)

In another breath, however, Linda Kauffman (1990:6)
reports that the question of whether men can be in
feminism is irrelevant and the real question is or should
be whether they can be against patriarchy. Reacting
positively to this, Joseph Allen Boone (1990:175-176) says
his impulse is simply to encourage men to identify with
gender discourse. Rather than hiding their views under
a veil of abstract musing, they should present their social
and ideological convictions on gender for critique as well.

Moi concludes in her essay “Men against patriarchy,” that
feminism needs men’s support anyway, for even typical
women’s issues such as the struggle for women’s abortion
rights in Norway and Britain could never have been won
without male support (p.184).

It is against this background that we intend to examine
in this essay, the convictions of Bode Osanyin on gender,
using his highly sensitive play Woman — more or less a
tribute to motherhood, as reference analysis. We intend
to determine whether Bode Osanyin holds a strong
feminist posture or is only contributing to discussions
against patriarchy on grounds of empathy and
humanism.

Osanyin: His Plays, His Views on
Feminism and Feminist Issues

Bode Osanyin has written about twenty plays and play-
lets, although not all have been published. Also, he has
about five novels and two volumes of poetry collections to
his credit. Some of his published works dealing deeply
and concentrating on women and femaleness include The
Noble Mistress; Rich Girl, Poor Boy (novels); The Waistline Beads and Other Poems (poetry); Ayitale and, of course, Woman – the main text for discussion here. Some other works not particularly centred on women but in which women play active and prominent roles include Our Patriot, Waiting For The Ferry, and so on.

As asked in an interview in his office at the University of Lagos on Wednesday, 20th November, 2002, what informs his disposition towards and interest on women and their plight, he simply replies; “The constituency of a writer is humanity”, of which women are concretely a part, whether we like it or not. For him, he does not want to be bogged down with labels such as “feminist,” or any other for that matter, but it is certain that he feels strongly for the plight of the African woman and indeed women all over the world; and, for those who see men in feminism as “critical cross-dressing,” courtesy Elaine Showalter (1983:130-149), Bode Osanyin logicalises thus:

“Usually, literatures on women are tied to children and issues on children. If women can and want to write about themselves, and are suspicious of men writing about women, should men also leave writing about children to women?

Bode Osanyin agrees with liberal and socialist feminists who argue that men are men and women are women. One cannot be the other both ways. They are fundamentally different in their natures, their experiences and their history. The goal of feminism therefore should really be to respect the difference and, with it, recognize that our language and body of knowledge will need adaptation to reflecting the diverse reality of both genders – (Barbara Arneil, 1999:4).
Concluding on his views about writing on women, Osanyin reasons that, in a just society, there would really be no need for feminism and that what the writer should concern himself with, is the essence in the complimentarity of both genders. He says: “Imagine a bird flying, can it fly on just one wing? No. both wings are important for creating balance as it flies. In the same way, I believe strongly that the existence of man and woman depends on one another”(Interview Nov. 20, 2002).

According to T.M Ilesanmi (1998:28), in nature, human and non-human objects or concepts are created in pairs, not of opposing, but shades of complimentary interactions in order to give meaning and life to the universe.

God created our world in two forms  
Day and night...  
Male and female  
The aged and the young...  
King and chief  
The sun and the moon  
The resident and the visitor...  
The slave and the son  
The husband and the wife (p.28)

The Yoruba translation of the above makes for a beautiful oral poetry. It is against this binary complimentary background that writers and critics should base their examination of human existence. The conflicts emanating therefrom, and there are bound to be many, should now form the sources of concern to the writer. The writer should consistently be advocating for the reinstatement of justice, freedom, happiness and hope in the face of tyranny and exploitation of all kinds, including patriarchy and phallocracy.
**Woman (The Play)**

Bode Osanyin's *Woman* can be described as a drama of evocative emotions that is rich in philosophical reflections, with strong political undercurrents. Centring on the life of Mrs. Ife - the woman, stuck by fate to her invalid, drug-addicted son, Remilekun, the play treats the dilemma of motherhood from the perspective of single parenthood. Events in the play turn out as they are primarily because of one given circumstance – the desertion of the family by Mr. Ife (a character not seen in the play). This is compounded by the induction of Remilekun into drug taking by his fellow schoolmates and later the unfortunate accident of falling into a gutter which cripples him for life. The pathos is that Mrs. Ife has to struggle and grapple with all these traumatic conditions with "hope" which eventually turns out to be "futile."

To be a woman and a mother ought to be a thing of joy, but what happens when the experience and institution of motherhood created essentially by patriarchy become oppressive agents to the woman?

Under patriarchy, says Lisa Tuttle, (1986:209), motherhood is forced labour. Men control it all, deciding when children will be born and how they are to be raised, even though women do the actual work. Then, as is common knowledge, when a child does well, the father takes the glory, but when the child becomes a nincompoop, the woman takes the blame and bears the brunt. This could really be frustrating, especially when everything not being equal and ends are somehow hard to meet. Expecting that she is most likely to fail in her bid to salvage her son from the ruin of drugs, Mrs Ife laments...

Die and leave me alone, your father did the same to me. He gave me horror before he ran away. Before
variably as wolves, tigers, beasts, hyenas, lions with fangs. She simply categorizes men as wild animals to fear and to loathe.

Categorizing women as eternally vulnerable creatures, always at the receiving end, she continues:

We are eaten, consumed, we are devoured, ravaged, the womb opens its gate for hyena, only to bring forth wild spider, the womb is a dumping ground (p. 97)

There is no doubt that there are many women who feel exactly like Mrs Ife in our world today. She makes it clear that she is not speaking for herself alone but representing the voice of womenfolk. However, as vulnerable and abused as womenfolk may seem, they also purportedly possess the power to redirect the course of their destiny. When she goes into her son’s room towards the end of the play and finds him dead, she reflects mournfully....

What is the meaning of life,
If it is such a waste?
Oh woman, mother of earth.
Is this your face?
You breed all sorts
From armed robber to charlatans
From lunatics to saints
You regenerate the world
Irrationally....
Why do you allow things to degenerate
Before your very eyes?
War you can prevent
Holocaust you can prevent
Theft of our collective will, you can prevent
The history of a nation, you can re-write
And yet, you sit folding your feminine arms
And watch your children destroy themselves
Before your very eyes

(pp 135-136)
The foregoing seems to be an interesting paradox. The same womenfolk who are exploited, abused, used, oppressed and dominated by menfolk, claim to possess the power to rewrite history as it were. Maybe, change their oppression to freedom, abuse to respect, exploitation to justice, and so on. If indeed they can, why haven't they? We may then ask... Are they really being oppressed, abused and discriminated against? And if they are, do they actually possess the power to change the course of things? These are questions requiring answers from mainstream or radical feminists. What is more? Talking about traditional roles and the place of the woman in society, some women are quick to draw the line between special functions for both genders. For instance, when Mrs Ife offers to go into the kitchen to get some food ready for everybody and Ogbeni Ogun casually volunteers to help in the kitchen, her reply is very instructive. And, coming from a woman with such a background, it leaves less to be desired about the struggle for gender equality.

Mrs Ife: Everybody must be feeling hungry now. You need a good meal to buttress the brain. I now go to the kitchen. Drop political issues and discuss something light. Woman, for example.

Ogbeni: Thank you for that sense of direction. I volunteer to help in the kitchen.

Mrs Ife: No, stay with Joseph. Kitchen is a woman's world. Forget about women emancipation, which I do not share. As battleground is for men, so is kitchen for woman. (p. 112).

I deliberately underlined "light." It is interesting even to know that a woman could regard discussions about their gender as light - weightless, frothy. This kind of
Mrs Ife: Never, never, never, never, that is my insulation. That is my own title, my entitlement. I am still married. I am married to my honour. A horse has certain dignity even if you climb it and ride it to death, I remain, "Mrs" to callers (p. 110).

Again, there is a certain affinity with this last point and the "third sex" phenomenon raised by Miss Erinfolami (Mrs Ife’s friend). Erinfolami is not married, yet she is in her late forties. She belongs to the upper class and possesses street wisdom.

As soon as Erinfolami is introduced as "Miss" by Mrs Ife, Joseph, the insatiable women-lover opens the discussion which leads to the "third sex" vocabulary.

**Joseph (enchanted)**: So you are an eligible spinster.

**Mrs Ife**: Are you an eligible bachelor?

**Joseph**: The more wives I have, the more eligible I become.

**Miss Erinfolami**: You are a clown.

**Ogbeni**: Don’t be too sure, Miss Erinfolami. You have to be vigilant.

**Miss Erinfolami**: Thank you for the warning. Actually, a matured lady like me should have no fear of men. I am graduating into the third sex.

**Joseph**: Third sex! What does that mean?

**Miss Erinfolami**: Ah, so you don’t know? Third sex means the very mature ladies. Respectable ones. The unwooable. The unapproachable. The impregnable (pp.118-119).
Mrs Ife: Never, never, never, never, that is my insulation. That is my own title, my entitlement. I am still married. I am married to my honour. A horse has certain dignity even if you climb it and ride it to death, I remain, "Mrs" to callers (p. 110).

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Joseph: Third sex! What does that mean?

Miss Erinfolami: Ah, so you don't know? Third sex means the very mature ladies. Respectable ones. The 'unwooable. The unapproachable. The impregnable (pp.118-119).
(She continues...) I will soon pick up the title of Ms. Simply pronounced as "Meez". That one bestrides Miss and Mrs. It is a combination of both. It is atmospheric, noble, wonderful (p.119).

Although, by implication, the third sex phrase later appears derogatory when considered in the context which Ogbeni Ogun analyses the position "third", Erinfolami means it to be something of nobility and of a particular class. Ogbeni Ogun views the word "third" as negative, retrogressive and downgrading. Replying Erinfolami, he queries.

... If the third sex is everything noble and wonderful, how about the term third world... our world is stratified. Oh! what a shame. They have not decided who belong to the first world. They have not decided who belong to the second world. But the black peoples of the world have been successfully pegged down so quickly to the third position. I refuse to be a third-class citizen of the world. The world of Monkeys and Chimpanzees and Gorillas - anthropoid and primates in their assorted varieties - must be the fourth world. The world of goats and cows must be the fifth world. The world of rats - I reject all stratification.... (P 119).

Ogbeni Ogun simply considers the classification by the West of the black race as "third," a blackmailing stratification, infamous, obnoxious and unacceptoble. And I believe, by this, he invites Miss Erinfolami to reconsider or reexamine the significance which she places on the new "Ms" title she wants to pick up as a "third sex" female, lady or woman.

Other Thematic Considerations in Woman

Woman is a play all women should read. And men too. Apart from the gender issues raised in the dramatic piece
however, several other issues are discussed randomly, but with the deftness of a coherent writer. In fact the play could be described as multithematic.

It is a comprehensive critical commentary on the life of a nation - our nation, bedevilled by moral political, social, spiritual and environmental ills. Bode Osanyin lampoons virtually all the institutions of government and the epileptic services they offer. Hope Eghagba summarizes woman by titling his review in The Guardian newspaper as "a Swipe at Social Ills". In very scathing language, Bode Osanyin castigates our public transportation system wondering if our commuter buses called "molue" are meant for men or for goods (p. 87). He criticizes our health system, noting that most emergency wards in our hospitals do not give immediate attention to patients. There, he says, "broken bones lie on stretchers for forty-eight hours unattended to, oozing life away. Groans turn to melodious sounds. And blood turns purple (p. 89).

In the same vein, he finds fault in our security system (p. 85); our police system (p. 90); our electricity supply system (p. 122); our culture and fashion sense (p. 89); our religious practices (pp 93, 107). Also, he condemns class-consciousness (pp 111 & 115) and speaks against our democracy, our electioneering system and the sit-tight mentality of African leaders. In the words of Duro Oni (2000:14), "Woman exposes the contagion of decay, poverty, corruption, election rigging and materialism. On the international level, Woman also treats the general theme of drug addiction, Rastafarianism, colonization and fascism". In short, according to Eghagba, a reading of Woman presents a picture of a play where the playwright wants to say everything in one stroke of the pen. For me, however, it is an element that makes the play tick, dramatic and rhythmic.
No doubt, Bode Osanyin gives a good account of himself as a creative writer who can transpose into the moods and passions of his characters, be they conservatives, radicals, cripples, able-bodied males or females etc, and constructs through them a poetry that is thoroughly evocative.

Conclusion

In spite of all the various themes touched by Bode Osanyin in Woman, the issue of gender takes a central place in the play, and it is hinged on the travails of Mrs Ife, the woman, as a single parent.

Osanyin exposes very succinctly the silent pains, the frustrations and sometimes the despair that single parents and unmarried women go through even when they are not particularly responsible for their circumstances. Once a woman finds herself in such a situation, she becomes virtually vulnerable to the caprices of men and, most times, the whims of their children. Osanyin seems to be calling the society to a redress. While condemning the syndrome of broken homes indirectly, he is calling on children to be wary of the friends they keep and the things they do, as these could have grave consequences on their lives and the lives of their parents, especially their mothers – the women, who unfortunately seem to be perpetually at the receiving end.

References


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Oni, Duro, "Of Epic and Total Theatre - An Introduction" in *Bode Osanyin's Three Plays* with Introduction by Duro Oni. op. cit.

