



TANURE OJAIDE'S FEMINIST RENDERINGS: THE ITA POEMS

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ABSTRACT

A number of African writers have approached the issue of women from several perspectives and Ojaide is one of such writers. His Ita poems approach the issue of feminism in his homeland from different perspectives; this point is noticeable in his treatment of love and obligation within a cultural context. He presents a highly patriarchal tradition that subjugates and abuses a woman in love. In contrast to this picture, Ojaide presents the revolt of this woman (Ita) against a system of oppression. However, he diminishes this revolt with an instance of obligation to the very culture that subjugates her. Ojaide adopts a middle course in his approach to feminism. This is true of his Ita poems as tone and imagery move from the critical to the wistful. The paper concludes that Ojaide presents two extremities then a middle course in his Ita poems. He is a poet who takes a neutral position on controversial issues; where one neither wins nor fails. He is more direct in portraying the abuse of and revolt of women than most Nigerian writers who treat feminist themes. His Ita poems bear no relation to love of country as some critics would like to claim. Ita is simply an image of revolt against a rigid system of living.

Keywords: feminism, patriarchal, Ita, cultural context, African writers

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INTRODUCTION

Earlier references to feminine imagery in African poetry can be found in the poems of Sedar Senghor, OkotP'Btek and Dennis Brutus. Poets like Senghor glorify a personified Africa in the image of a woman in poems like "Nuit de Sine" and "I Will Pronounce Your Name." P'Btek in "Songs of lawino" and "Song of Ocol" captures the traditional roles of women conflicting with western conceptions of the female. Brutus in "Letter to Martha" and "Night Song City" portrays absence and commitment to homeland personified in the image of a woman. Till now poems with feminist themes by Nigerian poets have not got much reading(s) like other poems that treat themes like leadership, poverty and nature. Although a number of Feminist poets like Ogun-dipe-

Leslie(Sew the Old days and other poems), Catherine Acholonu(The Spring's Last Drop) and IfiAmadiumen(Passion Waves) are fevered advocates of the stifling chauvinistic culture in Africa, their works have attracted less critical attention in major works of critical feminist leanings. By feminist leanings, reference is restricted to works that touch on feminist themes; bearing in mind that a female writer is not necessarily a feminist, as Ojaide(2007) rightly observes: "Male and female poets are no longer shy to expose their intimate feelings as in love poems. There has thus been a gradual self-liberalization that has resulted in uninhibited self-expression." Tanure Ojaide, however, is one poet who writes on diverse themes and has attracted more critical

discourse than the others. His Ita poems, which have feminist leanings, are found in three collections--*The Eagle's Vision*(1987),*the endless songs*(1989) and *When it no longer Matters, Where You Live* (1998). In these collections, Ojaide offers a new image of the woman in a different age. The critic Uwen Onookome-Okome(2002)cites poems from three collections of Ojaide's (Children of Iroko, Labyrinth of the Delta and the endless songs) and concludes that the poet's concern about love and gender is connected to his love for his homeland and respect for the womenfolk. Likewise, Olafioye(2000:65) concludes that Ita songs I,III and IV relate not only to Ojaide's love for "his people and country", but also "a tribute to women." Ita is derived from the Hausa word "Ta" which is inflected as "Ita"(She).But who is Ita? Is she the fabrication of mere dreams or a lady that eludes capture? Is she a symbol of femininity or motherhood? Where and how? In one of his poems, he, Ojaide, mentions that his Ita poems are mere poetic "cartographies" (SIC). Whether his poems should be viewed as such or not, the feminist thrust is visible in the Ita poems. In his eleven these poems, Ojaide leans towards themes related to gender issues. This stance betrays his feminist treatment of patriarchal influence, gender revolt, and cultural demands.

Patriarchal Influence

The cultural world within which Ita lives is patriarchal. As inferred from the poem, she is expected to be submissive to "the patriarch's dominion" (*When it No Longer Matters*, 37).Reference to patriarchy in the poem suggests male control. A similar reference is the "family council" which acts "without regard/for another's feelings" (*When it No Longer*, 33).Such a limitless show of authority disregards whatever opinion Ita holds over issues surrounding her life. The manifestation of this male authority is captured in Ita's confinement to a "doorless house guarded by a blind dog" (*When it No*, 47). "Doorless house" metaphorically captures a state of captivity. The metaphor "blind dog" not only betrays the persona's opinion about the custodians of patriarchy, but also the accusative tone behind his condemnation of the narrow views of patriarchy. Apart from being denied the right to take decisions, freedom of movement is

also denied her. This is significant because it reflects the life of women in patriarchal societies globally. Domination of men and restriction of women revolve around the subject matter of the Ita poems. Hence the persona sympathizes with the victim (Ita), thus: "They raised a club over your head,/ they locked you up and went to bed with keys"(When it No,34).The image of "club" shows the emotional and psychological assault on Ita, as the "keys" represent temporal confinement.

The physical and emotional abuse of women is another feature of male domination. This idea is further captured in the persona's monologue: "a phantom waved a forbidding flag at us, / then the misstep that partly disabled us" (the endless song, 37).As suggested by the pronominal reference "us", the persona becomes partisan in the struggle between Ita and the patriarchs. The metaphorical "phantom" suggests a nightmarish encounter with a custodian of patriarchy; this the persona witnesses. More scenic is the metaphorical description of flag waving. It stands for the extreme measures used to separate the two lovers (persona and Ita). He also describes the likes of the phantom as "tribal lords," "the brute," "mad dogs," "jailers," "constrictors of hope," "the guard," "blind dog," and "doomsters" (*When it No Longer...38*). They are also described as "monsters," "forsaken gods," and "rebels."(the endless song,37). These terms suggest the opinion of the persona about the patriarchs. The tension that reverberates in the poems is seen in the abusive words the persona uses to describe the adherents of patriarchy. This conflict climaxes as Ita's personal pursuit meets "with threats of death" (the endless song, 34).The use of contrast is seen in the tension and the conflict between Ita and the patriarchs. The contrast heightens as the persona gets involved (partisan) in the struggle; though his lament results from psychological strain since they are "stalked by a powerful lord and his livery of patriarchs/ who torment them with multiple severity" (*When it No*, 68). The persona further describes the cultural oppression euphemistically as "the gospel of obedience propagated by their tormentor" (emphasis added).These lines suggest that no compromise exists between both sides of the conflict.

Beyond the cultural context of patriarchal influence, the civil society poses yet another threat to Ita ; a point illustrated by the “magisterial order” that forbids Ita from doing as she pleases(When it No, 34). Related to this institutionalized verdict is the superstitious perception of the society that “two outcasts of patriarchal dominion/will offend the sacred customs of their people” (When it No..., 38).The significance of this idea is the universal borders that separate humans along ethnic and racial lines. The persona’s statement memorably emphasizes this point: “They say that Marnyang and Urhobo are so mutually unintelligible” (38).From the use of the expression “They say,” the persona implies a contrary view; that the universality of humans surpasses linguistic and language borders. Elsewhere, the persona adds that the custodians of culture “sing on the rubble of the institution” (When it No...36). By “institution” the excerpt, significantly, reiterates the universal theme of racial and tribal bias among people of various cultures. In the poems,therefore, the influence of patriarchy on individual liberty has negative effects.This fact re-echoes the statement that "Terror... humiliates, and takes away love, beauty and life"(Tijan Sallah, 133).

In the Ita poems, individualism clashes with communalism. Individualism focuses on a sense of personal responsibility (where the individual decides what is right for them) while communalism emphasizes a sense of group responsibility (where the community decides on what is right for every individual within its confines); this sense is captured by Ita who is the individual and depicted by patriarchs who are the communal. Ojaide, in the poems treated, makes a broader statement on women rights globally.

Gender Revolt

The revolt of Ita in the poems receives praises from the poet-persona. Disobedience and resistance, exuberance and bawdiness on the part of Ita(female) gain acceptance with the poet- persona.

In the tradition of using apostrophe to address evocatively, the persona praises Ita for being disobedient.Here, Ojaide's use of repetitive co-extension captures this fact: “You slipped through a thin crack--/you were smoke in the brick house,/you could not be contained by closed

doors”(When it No Longer,34-35). “Thin crack” is a metaphor that suggests how she escapes at the slightest opportunity that presents itself. The metaphor "smoke" stands for Ita’s ability to make so much trouble that cannot put it under control. In a conspiratorial tone, the persona commends Ita’s disobedience. Disobedience becomes a tool employed to gain freedom. Significantly, it reiterates universal concepts of revolt to gain freedom. This idea also reiterates the persona’s statement about Ita; “she... no longer/places herself down/for sacrifice” (Ita: III When it No Longer...37)

Resistance is memorably captured in the persona’s aphorism: “Freedom can only come from transfer of power/& that comes from civil disobedience and eruptions...” (When It No, 68). The aposiopesis are philosophical as it is suggestive in advocating for more rebellious ways of seeking freedom. In the poem “Song for Ita: III,” Ita meets violence with violence; she “broke down walls/ that stifled her, /hit back at the brute” (When it No Longer Matters 37). Kinaesthetic imagery captured in the expressions “broke down,” and “hit back” show the extent of physical revolt. A disintegration of the patriarchal system is imminent. To stop oppression the aggrieved often resorts to violence. In a broader scope it signifies how violence begets violence; especially in struggles toward freedom.

Elsewhere the feminist agenda is undoubtedly pronounced from the persona’s reflective declaration: “I will prefer to be a rebel than slave; / I will fight to death than be captured and executed--/ I will not submit“(38).Paradox underlies this excerpt. Rather than face the dilemma of enslavement and execution, after a docile submission, the partisan persona chooses to fight to death. One end awaits the persona.Death remains the sure end whether he submits willingly or fights to the end; but the former choice is a cowardly act while the later is honourable. Words like “rebel,” “slave,” “captured,” and “executed” convey a sense of seriousness not only in the tone of the persona but also in the condition described. The language is reactionary and has a tinge of partisan revolt: “We overturn the table/set by our hosts, our own parents/ we see as strangers” (the endless song, 34). Revolt against patriarchy becomes an established

code of behavior. A request for support rather than opposition shows the extent to which the persona makes a case for their action: "you'll surely raise a song for our dance;/if you don't, as I suspect many will,/you'll stick out a lashing tongue/that will neither hurt nor deter us!(When it No Longer Matters 37).The metaphor "lashing tongue" tells of the anticipated response of the society to their behaviour. However, he instigates Ita to react more rebelliously. This idea gains validation in his statement: "we have to remain warriors/to survive assaults of tormentors" (When it no Longer Matters, 35). The words "warriors", "assaults" and "tormentors" portray the extent of physical engagement between the conflicting sides.

The rebellion takes another course because the physical responses of the poet-persona to the situation vary from Ita's. For example, he describes the romantic misadventure this way: "a phantom waved a forbidding flag at us,/then the misstep that partly disabled us" (the endless song, 37).From the choice of the expressions "misstep" and "partly disabled us," it is clear that the persona views their revolt as a misguided one that has attracted considerable repercussions. Suddenly, the tone of praises turns into a more remorseful and sober one.

One also finds an underlying tone of regret and a mood of waning self-confidence compared to the persona's erstwhile praise of revolt. As the female in the relationship opts for open rebellion, she is praised by her male accomplice (poet-persona).However, the extent to which he gets involved in the conflict is only limited to the instigation of Ita(female).

Found in the Ita poems is an underlying element of covert interest. This interest results from the tone of praises and instigations that pervade the poems. As the poet-persona encourages the rebellion, he fails to accept the harsh consequences. He is only engrossed in the relationship as his wishful resolve shows: "I will beat my way through thorns to the tryst" (When it no Longer Matters...42)."Tryst" means the secret places where their escapades find fulfillment. Similarly, in "Ita:IV" he resolves thus: "I must go there/ to bring down Ita to my riverside haven"(When it no Longer Matters...47).Both "Tryst" and "riverside haven" are

symbols of the relationship between Ita and persona; not the revolt.

The setting of the tryst now becomes clearer. It is located in a riverside .Yet again, his resolve conveys only one wish: to possess Ita (female). "Ita IV" aptly captures this instance of exuberant desire: "I will break every wall in my way for a thoroughfare/ to reach my captive queen at Laarchip"(When it no Longer Matters...47).Kinaesthetic imagery is predominant in most of the poems. Actions like "I will beat my way through thorns...", "I must go there..." and " I will break every wall..." depict the depth of desperation in the persona. Exuberance comes with unguarded actions and risk taking. This idea is true in the Ita poems. It also shows the extent of commitment in the Ita versus poet-persona relationships; one is full of actions and the other is engaged in wish fulfillment. The poet-persona's world of fantasy betrays Ojaide's power of imagination; he is able to complement the docility of the persona with a make belief world of actions and darings-do.

Moreover, in the Ita poems, one notices a gradual drift from the persona's initial enthusiasm to a realization of the folly of their actions. However, this state of realization only affects the persona as Ita(female) carries on with her agenda, encouraged by the former. Besides, Ita's actions show how acts of feminism threaten to dislocate rigid patriarchal structures in all societies.

Cultural Demands

Ita as a product of the poet's imagination is dispelled by the mention of "Marnyang" and "Urhobo" which "are mutually unintelligible" (When It No,38). This reference brings one closer to the poet's homeland and era where common cases of interethnic marriages are frowned at. His quest for social change is imminent in the Ita poems which serve as a challenge to the threatened status quo. Nevertheless, change comes with a prize. First, the persona laments the end of his relationship with Ita: "After escaping the persecution house that patriarchs built with ventless stones, / they sing on the rubbles of the institution" (When it No Longer, 36).The metaphors "persecution house" and "ventless stones" serve as the structures put in place to enforce the demands of the patriarchal culture.

More importantly is the futility of seeing the conflict from a liberal perspective as the poet-persona initially attempts to do. This futility is depicted in the monologue in "Ita: VI":

I visit home to relieve the scourge of a
broken heart

By wearing an unsigned mask of traditional
civility. I know the perils of reprisal and
stone-throwing if I came out—

God bless that day without thunderbolts
That I rouse my love in the street or market
place!

(When it No Longer...68)

The metaphor of "a broken heart" shows the despair and the down-cast condition of the poet-persona as he obeys cultural tenets suggested in the expression "unsigned mask of traditional civility." Unlike Ita whose dramatic actions demonstrate her open rebellion against a rigid cultural set-up, the persona resigns himself to the dictates of culture. He is afraid of the "reprisal and stone-throwing" or the hyperbolic "thunderbolts" that may be directed toward him should he falter. As a precursor to his preferred reaction to this circumstance, the persona affirms that he has "to abandon the totem pet/kept in his heart to be savaged by rebels"(the endless song, 35). The "totem pet" is a metaphor that describes Ita, the love of his life. As the situation turns out to be, he has to let go. Situations can cause a change of mind and the betrayal of a loved one. Unlike Ita who is more idealistic and emotional, the poet-persona is more realistic and composed. He knows that society abhors a rebellious person. Here, one of the ironies of human relationship is once again emphasized in Ojaide's Ita poems. With resignation, as mentioned elsewhere, he substitutes active resistance for wish fulfillment in "the endless song":

...I dreamt you fell blind, I crippled
fleeing to a happy planet outside the tribe.
Once journey men to tribal lords, we had
taken the first steps in obedience to
dictates which had no room for our smiles.

Kinaesthetic imagery captured in the words "dreamt," "fell," "crippled," "fleeing" and "taken"

diminish any sense of triumph on the part of both Ita and the poet-persona. Now, freedom comes at a cost which he is not ready to actualize. A break of social ties is discernible either ways; he is left to drift between the culture that has nurtured Ita and the new values she has imbibed which undoubtedly conflict with her cultural values. Similarly, the poet-persona has chosen a middle course in the relationship and unwittingly moves away from Ita's extremities. This idea finds expression in his "Song for Ita(endless song,34)":

... I voicelessly intone the word to live
through the powerful clashes let me yield
to love,yield to life in this struggle beyond
me...

The monologue explains itself. A lack of confidence to say what is on his mind conveys the idea in the expression "voicelessly intone," in line 1. In Line 2, the words "powerful clashes" re-echo the built-up conflict between his relationship with Ita and the culture of patriarchy. Repetition in line 3 captures the antithetical situation of his love for Ita and his obligation to culture. These two forces, stronger than his will, go a long way to explain the posture of neutrality he assumes.

In the Ita poems, an emotional bond is on the verge of collapse. Estrangement now becomes the new phenomenon that results from two conflicting ideals: a culture of patriarchy and that of feminism. Ojaide, however, destroys the trend of his feminist stance at some point. Subservience becomes an alternative to the persona who initially praises Ita's stiff resistance to patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

The domineering attitude of men and the restriction of women revolve around the subject matter of the Ita poems. The significance of this idea is the universal borders that separate humans along ethnic and racial lines. It reiterates the universal theme of racial and tribal bias among people of various cultures. Disobedience and resistance, exuberance and bawdiness on the part of Ita(female) gain acceptance with the persona in most of the Ita poems. However, the poet-persona takes a middle course between the extremities of Ita and the heavy-handedness of culture.

Unlike Brutus who is more direct in his love for his homeland, Senghor who is loftier in his Negritudist flair, B'tek who captures women coming to terms with cultural conflicts, Ojaide is mild in his feminist drive. His portrayal of the patriarchal system with its rigid codes of conduct is negative; from his use of imagery. This art of word painting negates his praise of Ita's rebellious responses to suppression. However, he takes a middle course and accepts the dictates of the very culture he had praised Ita for resisting. This flirting with two ideals makes it difficult to conclude on Ojaide's feminist view. From the two extremities and the middle course he presents, Ojaide could be seen as a poet who takes a neutral position on controversial issues; where one neither wins nor fails. It is true, from his Ita poems, that Ojaide is more direct in portraying the abuse of and revolt of women than most Nigerian writers who treat feminist themes. Relating Ita to the love of country, as some critics have done, is far-fetched. Ita is an image of revolt against a rigid system of living.

Tone, form and imagery are utilized in the Ita poems to achieve the poet's intention. The quarrelsome and bantering tones resonate all through the Ita poems. This is true because the poet adopts the monologue form in all his Ita poems. Its prosaic nature emphasizes the directness of the message which is reactionary; at times, philosophical; and at other times, mere wistful recollections. It also conveys the poet-persona's partisan attitude in the Ita poems. His extensive use of kinaesthetic imagery captures the action-laden acts of domination, revolt and resignation in most of the poems.

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