GENDER IDEOLOGY: PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN YORÙBÁ ÌJÁLÁ

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Previous studies of ìjálá, notably, Babalọla (1966) and Ajuwon (1981) have concentrated mainly on analysis of text, providing information about thematic points and stylistic devices in language use. The studies, among other things, establish the literariness of ìjálá, and furthermore proffer knowledge and understanding of the content and form of ìjálá. Despite their usefulness, however, the studies neglect the sociological import of ìjálá poetry.

Like any other form of literature, ìjálá poetry is part and product of society. Its nature is essentially social. Sociology of literature postulates that literary works do not exist in isolation from the society that produces them. Neither the artist, his language, nor his ideas are independent of his society, each of these affecting and being affected by the others. Thus, in order to provide a fuller and richer understanding of ìjálá the tripartite relationship between the art, the artist, and the society should be studied.

Few studies exist on women in Yorùbá oral literature. Among such studies are: Ògünsina (1982), Ògünsina (1984) and Oyesakin (1989). Ògünsina (1982) reveals that women are among the most important characters in Yorùbá oral prose narrative and that in many instances they are the protagonists. Among the features of women depicted in the prose narratives are physical beauty, envy and jealousy, high propensity for child-bearing and child-rearing as well as an intense capacity for love. In Ògünsina (1984) Yorùbá proverbs are depicted as veritable mines of information and knowledge about women. Thus, various aspects of women as conceived in Yorùbá proverbs are highlighted: their physical, mental, moral and behavioural attributes as well as their weaknesses. Oyesakin (1989) discusses images of women in the Ìfá literary corpus: their physical beauty, moral attributes, weaknesses and mysterious powers. Useful as the studies are, their portrayal of women is more descriptive than analytical, and their studies are based purely on text alone rather than on any specific theoretical framework. No study has, to our knowledge, examined Yorùbá ìjálá within the perspective of literary sociology, thus it is from this perspective that this paper attempts to examine the portrayal of women in ìjálá. This will provide us with a deeper understanding and advance a clearer view of the portrayal of women in ìjálá, and, more importantly, increase our knowledge of the concept of women in traditional lore.

Literature as a social fact, has links with various aspects of the society that produces it. As Goldmann (1977) rightly observes, literature is holistic. It is a social reality that should be seen as a totality; this is because a work of
art is composed of parts in a particular relationship to each other, it is a part of a larger whole. Thus, in examining a work of art, it should be borne in mind that the artist’s cultural background, his social class, and the ideology of his society, all influence his art in various ways. Ideology as a system of practices, informs every aspect of daily life. Although it originates in particular cultural conditions, it authorizes its beliefs and practices as ‘universal’ and ‘natural.’ Literature, whether oral or written, is a transmitter of ideology; but literature does more than just transmit ideology, in many cases it creates it.

Ijálá is the Yorùbá hunter’s poetry in praise of Ògún, the violent warrior, god of hunting, warfare and all iron implements. Ijálá chants by women, about women, and from female a perspective, are rare. Perhaps because of Ògún’s mythical image of domineering masculinity (his tall, imposing personality, sexual prowess and frightening herbal power) ijálá chants usually have a masculinist bias. Ijálá chanters are mostly hunters and/or their offspring, for, among the Yorùbá, hunting is a male-dominated occupation. In pre-colonial Yorùbá times, the hunter was the ideal of manhood, being regarded as a man of immense physical strength, dauntless courage and an invincible security for the entire community. The hunter was famous not only for his physical energy but also his remarkable powers with herbs. Yorùbá oral literary tradition is replete with myths and tales of marvellous feats and awe-inspiring exploits of hunters in battlefields and hunting expeditions. Thus, unlike other genres such as Ifá divination poetry, folktales and proverbs, ijálá chants are mostly records of male experience, composed in most cases by men and from a male perspective. Since Yorùbá women are not hunters, records of their performance in ijálá are few. It is as a result of this dearth of material that this paper is limited to the four ijálá narratives recorded in Yemitan’s Ijálá Aré Ōde.

Most of the ijálá chants studied in this paper are narrative poems in which women have thematic prominence. In all the chants the image of women is conspicuous, for instance, in the chant entitled Omówùmí wọlẹ ní Ile-Ife, ‘Omówùmí buries himself alive at Ilé-Ife,’ the depiction of woman occurs in the first stanza:

Obinrin lódále, Obinrin lèké
Obinrin ló se ikù pa Omówùmí
Tó fi bínú wọlẹ ní ‘fè

(Treacherous woman, dishonest woman
Woman caused Omówùmí’s death
Such that he angrily buried himself alive at Ifè)

All translations of the ijálá chants are by the author.
This portrayal of woman right in the first stanza of the poem is significant, there is a deliberate effort to give the woman-image a lexical and thematic prominence. The successive, syntactic repetition of Òbinrin ni, ‘It is woman’ is a signification of her role in the story. All taken together, the repetitive device brings out an unequivocal and striking picture of woman as diabolical and destructive. In the Ìjálá chants examined in this paper, women are given various images, they are treacherous, physically attractive, stubborn and inconsequential. An analysis of these portraits will be illuminating.

In the Ìjálá piece Òmòwùmí wọlè nílé Ìfè, Òmòwùmí, a great hunter and Ògún devotee, tells his wife that for the purpose of a particular medicine that he uses, his wife must not serve him food with her left hand. Òmòwùmí goes hunting and, having stayed away for a very long time, at long last returns home during the Ògún festival. By the time he reaches home, all the festival food has been consumed so he requests his wife to prepare cold, refreshing gruel for him. His wife returns with the gruel and serves her husband with her left hand! Òmòwùmí screams in dismay, stamps his feet on the ground and immediately disappears into the ground with his wife. It is this singular incident that informs the chanter’s assertion that women are perfidious and deceitful, which epitomizes the patriarchal ideology of women in Yorùbá society.

In Ìyawó alágbóran ‘The stubborn bride’, woman is depicted as an embodiment of extreme disobedience and stubbornness. According to the chanter, in an unnamed community, it is forbidden for a new bride to go to River Gbingbin to fetch water. However, despite all appeals and warnings, the young, new bride insists on going to that river. Her father-in-law, who traditionally must have the final say on such matters, is the first to overrule the bride’s desire because, according to him, it is a taboo for a new bride to go to the River Gbingbin. But the new bride defies all pleas and entreaties. She disagrees with her father-in-law, mother-in-law, husband, brother-in-law and all other members of the extended family and goes to the river. After drawing water, she decides to take a bath in the river. She removes her clothes and hangs them on the Gbingbin tree. After enjoying a refreshing bath she stretches out her hand to take her clothes from the tree but to her amazement, the tree suddenly grows taller beyond her reach and all her efforts to bring them down fail. Damning the consequences she takes up her pot of water and returns home naked. Her nakedness astounds all members of the community and her nudity is taken for madness. The townspeople rush to the river but all their efforts to bring down her clothes end in failure. They try to cut down the tree, but because it is an enchanted tree it makes a frightening and deafening noise at each stroke of the axe. It is finally overpowered and cut down by a deaf and dumb man who is unaware of the
deafening noise of the mysterious spirit-tree. Thus, the thrust of this ijálá chant is that women are extremely obstinate and unyielding.

In another piece, Kunuwen, the eponymous Kunuwen is the only child of the Alaafin of Oyo. She is astonishingly beautiful but she is so conscious of her uncommon elegance that she becomes self-conceited and haughty and refuses all counsel to choose a husband from her many suitors. One market day, she meets Aroni, a wonderfully handsome man, and instantly falls in love with him. She approaches Aroni and requests him to be her husband. She takes him home and introduces him to her parents as her chosen husband and expresses her desire to go with him that same day. She goes away with Aroni who, unfortunately, is a supernatural being with mystical powers and during a demonstration of his traditional medicine, Kunuwen is burnt to death. Conscious of the consequences of his action, Aroni escapes into the bush never to be found and his escape lands the Oníkóyí (Oba of Ìkòyí) in trouble because Aroni is a subject of the Oníkóyí and it is in Ìkòyí that the event happens. The Alaafin of Oyo, (Kunuwen’s father), who is at the apex of the Yorùbá monarchical authority, orders the Oníkóyí to produce Aroni either dead or alive. This leads the Oníkóyí to engage in endless wars in search of Aroni. It is this event that gives rise to the proverb, Aroni ọ wálé Oníkóyí kò simi ogun lílò, ‘For as long as Aroni refuses to return home, the Oníkóyí shall never rest from going to war.’ This covertly suggests that beautiful women may be the cause of trouble.

In Ìjà Ògún pèlú Sàngó, ‘The fight between Ògún and Sàngó’, Ògún is defeated publicly three times in a wrestling duel. As a result of Ògún’s defeat, the whole community is afflicted with drought. The Oba invites the duellers to a peace meeting and after listening to their statements, he declares:

Obinrinbinrin ni yóò dá ejo yilí
Wón wa pe Obinrin tòn jè Yemoja

A mere woman will judge this case
They then called on the woman Yemoja

(Yemitan 1979: 15)

In this ijálá piece, woman is depicted as ‘ordinary’ or ‘commonplace.’ The fact of the case before the Oba is so glaring and so easy that it does not require the superior masculine wisdom to pronounce the verdict, it is such a simple case that even a ‘mere’, ‘inconsequential’ woman can judge it. In many other ijálá chants studied, there are instances when comments are introduced as digressive devices for relaxation and audience participation. Examples of such comments are:

E má jè a finú hànm tàn fòbinrin
Ní bí ojú rè ó tò ènù è tò bè

Let not all secrets be made known to woman
Where her eyes do not reach her mouth does

(Babalola 1966: 67)
The main point of the excerpt is the expression of women as untrustworthy. There are other examples such as:

- Ṓkọ kù n bá ṣó kù
  Ekùn èkè ni lọdọ obinrin. (Babalọla 1966: 88)
  ‘My husband, if you die, I will die with you’
  Is falsehood from a woman

Both excerpts express a masculinist viewpoint about the psychology of women. From the patriarchal Yorùbá standpoint, a woman’s protestation of loyalty and affection to her husband cannot be taken seriously, being regarded as usually false and deceptive.

The portrayal of women in the above excerpts is glaringly negative and subjective. It is a depiction of gender ideology in an overwhelmingly patriarchal society. It exposes the sexist bias of the indigenous male literary tradition and shows the extent of subjugation of women by men in a society that is excessively masculinist. To appreciate the gender hierarchy depicted in the chants, it is necessary to consider them in the socio-political context that produced them.

In Yorùbá traditional society the man occupies an eminent position. He is regarded as superior to his wife; he is the family head, and he alone can rise up to the headship of the entire community. No woman, however prominent, may be allowed to hold a headship chieftaincy title in her father’s house. The man is the hunter, sentry and soldier, he is the founding father in many communities, whereas the woman, on the other hand, plays a subservient role. The traditional society expects chastity from her before marriage and throughout her life she is expected to maintain fidelity and obedience to her husband. She and her children belong to her husband, even if her husband dies prematurely, she is expected to remarry within the family as she constitutes a portion of her husband’s property to be shared out in the family. She is not entitled to the ownership of her husband’s landed property as she and her husband’s land are owned by the family.

This background then underscores the ìjálá chanter’s rationale for portraying women as in the examples cited above. Her image is often informed by her negative reactions to traditionally constituted authority and societal norms. Whatever circumstances and situations, be they physical or psychological, that cause her to react in the way she does are not taken into consideration. The facts of her personality and potentiality are trivialized in Yorùbá conception. This is why Òmòwùmì’s wife is judged treacherous because she violates her husband’s injunction and so suffers an untimely death, a victim of domineering masculine authority. Thus, the ìjálá chanter is simply playing his role as an agent of male supremacy, he is a loyal traditional artist and his poetry is an artistic presentation of his cultural milieu.
To what extent can the portrayal of women in ọjọlọ be considered balanced and impartial? One cannot but question its validity when viewed against Dryden’s observation that ‘the function of literature is to provide a just and lively image of human nature’ (quoted in Daiches 1981: 74, q.v.).

A critical look at certain incidents in some of the ọjọlọ chants cited in this paper confirms the view-point of Marxist literary sociology that ‘Literature is the product of a particular class consciousness’ (Ogunsina 1987: 60-69). The ọjọlọ chanter is usually a hunter or a devotee of Ọgún, and may also be a blacksmith or warrior like Ọgún. The ọjọlọ piece entitled Ọmọwùmí wọle ni Ilé-Ifè is the expression of the world-view of a particular social group, covertly extols the dignity, prowess and prestige of the hunter, who from a Yorùbá traditional perspective constitutes the ideal of manhood. The chant reinforces the super-ego and authority of men over women. The chanter’s emphatic and declarative language that women are treacherous and deceitful points to language as an effective weapon of masculinist oppression. The mysterious and sudden death of Ọmọwùmí and his unnamed wife, paints a lurid picture of male domination and superiority as against female subordination, inferiority and powerlessness.

From the Yorùbá traditional perspective, the woman has no moral justification to revolt against her husband, all she has to do is obey uncomplainingly. It is her rebellious reaction that makes her and all women become treacherous and deceitful. This declaration undermines a fundamental human propensity. Ọmọwùmí’s wife is a human being, she has a right to be angry and her reaction to her husband is an expression of anger. She has cause to be angry for her husband’s long departure from home leaving her alone to take care of the children and her action is a signification of righteous indignation. Furthermore, she is most probably not well informed of what exactly would happen if she serves her husband food with her left hand, as a wife she has a right to know. Her action does not therefore amount to treachery, rather, it is an expression of natural human tendency, the instinct of inquisitiveness, which is a stepping stone to social emancipation.

In the ọjọlọ piece titled Ịgba ọbọran ‘The stubborn bride’ the portrayal of the new bride as obdurate is partial and shallow. Viewed from Goldmann’s genetic structuralist approach, that depiction is repressive. The new bride is a part of society and accepting the chanter’s portrait of her as extremely stubborn cannot give us a full picture of her. In order to fully understand her image, she should be examined within the perspective of her social class. Viewed within this genetic structuralist perspective, her role and behaviour will have a clearer meaning.

What is the genesis of her behaviour? In the first place, she is a new bride and even from a traditional perspective, she is a symbol of modernity, a product of a new age. Thus, she cannot accept an outlandish, restrictionist
ideology which puts undue restraint on societal liberty. She possesses within her the inquisitive, adventurous spirit. Her intransigence offends the old brigade because she cannot conform with an ideology that breeds social stagnation and mental inertia. Another male of her spirit and generation prevails on the traditionalists to allow her to go to the river. Rather than being portrayed as obdurate and unyielding, she might on the other hand be regarded as a personification of youthful vitality, will-power and determination. On the other hand, her experiences at the river depict the unfair power of myth over science. For the new bride, it is not her suffering that matters, but the consequences of it. First, her experiences at the river produce a diagnostic effect. Through her unpleasant experiences, she succeeds in identifying the cause of a socio-cultural taboo that has psychologically afflicted the society from time immemorial. Her suffering is a personal sacrifice for the emancipation of her society, and her physical and psychological agony leads to a concerted effort to cut down the enchanted tree that has for long undermined her community’s liberty. Her nakedness is furthermore an emblem of determination. Hers is a redemptive stubbornness that redeems the society from demonic bondage and, thus, she embodies a liberating ideal of potentiality, of a dynamic, active and fulfilling future for African women.

In the ìjálá entitled Kunuwen, the chanter indirectly presents a Yorùbá conception of women, namely, that beautiful women are often arrogant and self-opinionated. The chanter indirectly suggests that woman is the cause of Onikọyif’s war-mongering. The chanter’s portrayal of women here confirms the patriarchal ideology that woman is usually the cause of whatever goes wrong in the home. Kunuwen suffers for her intransigence and will-power and, although her marriage ends in disaster, yet her stand on the issue of her marriage is remarkable. Her determination to have a say in the choice of her life-partner is a challenge to the traditional ideology of marriage where the father’s choice is law. She stoutly repudiates an ideology that makes her a passive victim of male domination. Her action, then, embodies a resistance to what Busia (1989) calls ‘the voicelessness of the black woman,’ (see Stratton 1994: 35).

The portrayal of women in Ìjà Ògùn pelu Sàngó, ‘The fight between Ògùn and Sàngó’ is intriguing and stimulating. In his effort to settle a quarrel between the two warring deities Ògùn and Sàngó, the Òba calls on a woman to judge the case. He declares: Òbinrinbinrin ní yóó dá ejó yìi, ‘mere, insignificant woman will judge this case.’ His use of the word Òbinrinbinrin, ‘mere woman’, reinforces his masculinity, portraying the male-female hierarchy in the Yorùbá cultural setting. To the Yorùbá ideology the man is the essential, the subject, while the woman is the incidental, the inessential. But, as used in the context of the story, the view is misleading and hypocritical. It is misleading because, as would be seen
later, the Qba is being diplomatic. It is hypocritical because it is usually when men or women want to deride men in comparison to women that they refer to them as obinrinbinrin ‘mere woman.’ In order to gain an accurate assessment of the Qba’s statement, it will be useful to examine it within the Yorùbá socio-cultural context.

To what extent can women be said to be inconsequential in the Yorùbá socio-cultural context? In the social, religious and political setting, women perform significant roles. They hold the significant posts of Ìyáalée-ilé (the most senior woman in the household), Ìyá-ìlé-òrí (the most senior woman in the palace) and the Ìyálóde (the head of all women in the community) who participate effectively in the social and political affairs of the community. Women are also indispensable in religious affairs; even in the comity of deities, women are not insignificant: along with the male deities such as Ògùn and Sàngó, there are also female deities such as Yemoja, Yemòò, Yemoji and Òya among others, who are by no means considered insignificant. The reference to Yemoja as obinrinbinrin in the ìjálá text referred to above, is therefore an enigmatic expression which requires a further analysis.

On the surface, the statement can be seen as a depiction of the oppressive cultural ideology of male supremacy; this, however, would be a superficial interpretation. A deeper analysis of the relationship between the text and the social structure would offer a fuller understanding. In the ìjálá context, rather than pronounce judgement himself, the Qba calls on an ‘inconsequential’ person to judge the case, calling on Yemoja, a woman. The invitation of Yemoja is important. Why her? A study of the character and status of Yemoja and the warring deities, Ògùn and Sàngó, in Yorùbá mythology is pertinent. It will deepen our understanding of the Qba’s point in his usage of obinrinbinrin ‘mere woman.’

From the point of view of Yorùbá mythology, Ògùn and Sàngó are friends. Both of them occupy high positions in the hierarchy of deities. Ògùn is a powerful warrior, reputed for his expertise in the production, control and use of iron implements and he is known to possess mystical powers. Sàngó, on the other hand, is a mighty man of valour, he is extremely stubborn and unruly, above all, a fiery, fierce and merciless character. The Qba is no doubt aware of the intricacy of the case before him and must certainly have a hidden reason for calling on Yemoja. Adeoye (1989) states that in Yorùbá traditional religion, Yemoja is one of the most important female deities and occupies a very senior position in Yorùbá pantheon. Among other deities, Yemoja is a distinguished character, an extremely cool-headed, calm, patient and highly intelligent woman. As a result of these sterling qualities, Yemoja is highly respected, even venerated, in the community.
At the centre of the matter is the Oba who is the live-wire of the traditional society. He is the Chief priest, Chief Executive and the fountain of honour and justice. All serious cases must be judged by him, no matter what the status of those involved. In this text, however, rather than judge the case himself, he calls on Yemoja. In Yoruba traditional jurisprudence, the Oba does not sit alone in judgement, he often has his council of chiefs and sometimes women around him. Thus he does not talk first, rather he motivates others to participate in the judgement. In the situation in the iyalá text he must have had some men with him, but instead of calling on any of them he calls on a 'mere woman.'

The kernel of the Oba's problem is that the quarrel is between two powerful deities, how then would he, a human, judge the superhuman? Thus he calls on Yemoja, a co-superhuman, highly intelligent and respected, to judge the case. His use of obinrinbinrin is a diplomatic ploy to turn the matter into a judgement of superhumans by other superhumans and, furthermore, is a euphemistic expression to soften the anger of the warring deities by making them realize the needlessness of their fight. The Oba's statement is a judicious use of language to cool down tension and create the impression that the case would be resolved with ease. Thus, the expression obinrinbinrin is symbolic in the sense that in the Yoruba traditional setting, woman is a symbol of ease. However, obinrinbinrin, as used in this iyalá context, embodies the Yoruba patriarchal ideology which usually trivializes the social role and political importance of women in society. There is no doubt that Yemoja's presence at the judicial council is a negation of the perception of feminine inferiority. Indeed, the fact of her invitation to adjudicate in a puzzling case is a strong confirmation of her social influence and political integrity. However, in keeping with the traditional ideology of patriarchy which he represents, the iyalá chanter plays down her social significance. His portrayal of Yemoja defines a society that is conventionally patriarchal, a society that views women as congenitally inferior and subordinate to men. In the four exposures of men and women in the iyalá chants examined in this paper, the chanter, who invariably is a man, upholds the world view of his male-dominated social class. This world view ascribes to men phallic power, super-ego and superiority and to women weakness, subordination and inferiority. Such portrayals are biased, masculinist images that serve to rationalize and therefore to perpetuate sexual inequality in the society.

Conclusion

This study of women in iyalá chants reveals that even from the pre-colonial Yoruba past women have been oppressed, misinterpreted and trivialized by the dominant patriarchal oral literary tradition. It has unveiled some of the biases at work in the traditional oral literature, namely the fact that themes,
characterization, language and situations have often been defined according to a masculinist perspective. It further shows that right from the pre-colonial Yorùbá times gender ideology has been firmly established and negatively employed at various levels of the social strata.

As seen in this analysis of ịjála, it is clear that in the presentation of his art the Yorùbá oral artist, in many cases, is out to perform an ideological function, namely, to legitimate and reinforce the indigenous patriarchal ideology. In most cases, therefore, what we have is a literature whose concern is wholly for men and one in which women are of little or no consequence and this study is, thus, an exposure of the sexist bias of Yorùbá oral tradition, an aspect that has not received much attention from Yorùbá literary critics.

Undoubtedly, there is a dearth of literature about women in Yorùbá oral literature. There is a paucity of critical studies on women in Yorùbá orature. Yorùbá history, myths and oríkì, among others, are, in most cases, records of male experience by men and from a male perspective. To a large extent, images of women in Yorùbá oral and written literary tradition are awkward and inaccurate. For instance, Yorùbá proverbs and co-wife tales are replete with portrayals of female perfidy, envy and jealousy. Karin Barber (1994: 51) observes this in both the Yorùbá novel and in popular theatre:

Both Odunjo and Adejobi show Kuye’s worst tormentors as women; but while Odunjo’s women are just bad-tempered, selfish people, Adejobi’s display the great female faults of popular stereotype: greed, unfaithfulness, duplicity.

These are strong confirmations of the masculinist bias of the Yorùbá literary artist. Women are known to have played significant socio-political roles in the pre-colonial, colonial and the current, post-colonial society. But these are usually trivialized and misrepresented by literary artists and playwrights, thus distorting our knowledge of women’s contribution to history and reality. It is time for our oral artists, playwrights and writers to change gear and create literatures that would portray the true dignity and prestige of African women. We certainly need a new literary tradition that will extend our knowledge about women’s experience and contribution to history, culture and society.
REFERENCES


