

Women Marginalization and the Issue of Political Empowerment in Nigeria: A Study of Ahmed Yerima's *Orisa Ibeji* and Irene Salami's *More Than Dancing*

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Abstract

For so many years down memory lane, African women have found themselves in a serious marginalization predicament due to the patriarchal nature of African societies and at present the marginalization of the women folk in Nigeria is still evident in some areas such as politics. The study adopted the qualitative research method to analyze the case studies via content analysis, while it made use of the theory of womanism to interrogate how women are marginalized by highlighting the possible consequences of such actions. The research concluded that women folk can achieve more and can offer more than being political cheerleaders thus, it makes a clarion call for women to wake up and take a stance of not being relegated to the background but to stand up for themselves without fear or prejudice.

Keywords: Women; Marginalization; Political; Empowerment

Introduction

Marginalization is one of the consequences of the post-colonial literature. The tool of marginalization is generally used to depict and analyze socio-cultural, political, and economic spheres in which the disadvantaged groups of the racially, and religiously discriminated people struggle to gain access to resources and aspire to get full participation in social life. The marginalized people have been and still are socially, economically, politically, and legally ignored, excluded or neglected and are therefore, vulnerable to livelihood change. Avadesh Singh defines Marginalization as “the temporary state of having been put aside of living in relative isolation at the edge of a system (cultural, social, political, or economic) in mind, when one excludes certain domains or a phenomenon from one’s thinking because they don’t correspond to the main-stream philosophy.” (2) The term marginalization generally describes the exclusion or removal of some people by overt actions or tendencies of human societies. Most times, people get marginalized from the prevalent system of main stream without desire. In

general, marginalization affects the development and economy of the society. This is because marginalization is a process that flows through the marginalized group and this deals with social conditions that are classified under various labels age power, gender, and so many others.

The term marginalization involves so many complexities and these develop complications if they are not solved with human activities at a proper time. Marginalization appears in every part of the society deliberately or by accident. It is also a process that includes many external forces. In Nigeria, many individuals or groups are marginalized based on ethnicity, tribe, religion, class, level of education, or even on health ground. The marginalized people in general become the victim of a crisis of identity which consequently leads to a rise in social militancy, dereliction, and female subjugation among others. It, therefore, keeps these groups away from decision-making abilities and power, and in most cases, these marginalized groups are always fathomed, rejected, subjugated and ignored by the powerful social agencies.

The term marginalization illustrates two major conceptual frameworks; societal marginalization and spatial marginalization. Societal marginalization depicts the broad canvas of human dimensions that talk of the human population, religion, culture, and social stratification (e.g. caste, class, ethnicity, gender, etc). Societal marginalization focuses on the study of the underlying factors responsible for exclusion, social-inequality, social injustice. This aspect of marginalization is associated with social conditions and it is not a divine law but a result of the actions of various social agencies of powerful authority such as corrupt officials, ethnic society, false beliefs, religious fundamentalism, dualistic economy, feudal system, all of them contribute powerfully to marginalization. In most cases, societal marginalization is imposed on powerless people by powerful human beings and it appears in the interest of an individual and sometimes for the benefit of a certain group thus, if not addressed properly, it will indirectly affect the growth of an individual or a specific group of people. Spatial marginalization deals with the geographical infrastructure of a group. It depicts the geographical remoteness of an area from major economic and corresponding centers. It deals with remote areas where everything proves difficult for easy access. Thus, such an area remains away from the benefits of mainstream resources. But, for the purpose of this research, emphasis is being laid on societal marginalization while narrowing it down to female marginalization.

Based on facts, women constitute half of the world's population; though the journey of women is a bit challenging in a patriarchal, hierarchical, and male-oriented society where the marginalization of women is executed on a gender basis. Most women spend 8-10 hours per day on household duties; for a long time, the housework has been the responsibility of "women" which indicates excessive work of women as compared to

men. Thus, they are marginalized at the level of housewives; an unproductive domestic duty that does not offer their desirable recognition. This stamp of gender, therefore, prohibits them from marching beyond certain steps, as a result; they remain secluded and segregated from the mainstream.

The status of women is significant in a social justice of a society because they share the progress of humanity in every age and they serve as the cornerstone of stability. The report of Human Development highlights:

Women are the world's largest excluded group. Even though they make up half the adult population and often contribute much more than their share to society inside and outside the home, they are frequently excluded from positions of power. They make up just 10% of the world's parliamentary representatives and consistently less than 4% of cabinet ministers or other positions of executive authority ... women participate inadequately in employment, and in some industrial countries, women's earnings are less than half of those of men ... indeed for decades, life has changed very little for 500 million rural women in the developing world. (14).

Marginalization of women can be seen in various aspects of our daily lives ranging from education to employment to politics etc. The participation of women in politics in Nigeria is yet to be satisfactory although, the government has made some efforts to empower women in politics by setting some policies but that scenario is yet to attain a satisfactory height. Many women are sidelined in the field of politics by males and their husbands. Although women participate in politics, they are tactically kept away from the decision-making bench. In the employment aspect in most cases, men are given the privilege of certain job positions while some stereotyped kinds of jobs are kept for the women. In terms of education, women are less bestowed with education. Girls' education is always biased because of the rigorous glances of a culturist. The attitudes and expectations of girls toward work, marriage, and the future are more important factors than getting an education. Most girls even look at marriage as the vital job of their lives while some view marriage as a higher form of achievement. The result of these marginalization issues has presented women with the task of the quest for identity, the journey of women in this regard is filled with challenges and the consciousness of the marginalized status of women has given them a new outlook on themselves thus, this created awareness gave rise to identity crisis in their mind. Helen Hacker defined the minority group as:

Any group of people who because of their physical or cultural characteristics are singled out from others in the society which they live for differential unequal treatment, and who therefore regards themselves as objects of collective discrimination. (60).

The above definition is applied to women and hereby creates a question of where women really belong. But looking at the bright side, the awareness of women's marginalization can be the key to opening an opportunity for women to prove themselves and showcase positive new dimensions of their personality.

Womanism as a theory is a neologism coined by the American, Alice Walker. She argues that the life experiences of women of colour in womanism originally are theologically oriented. The word comes from the theology of Jacquelyn Grant '*White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist response; Perspectives on Womanist Theology.*' Delores Williams who is the pioneer and leading scholar of Womanist theology defined it as follows:

Womanist theology is connected with a prophetic voice for the welfare of the entire African American community, men and women, adults and children. Womanist theory tries to help you see black women and to encourage them to have confidence in the significance of their experience and their belief for the determination of the character of Christian religion in the African American community. Womanist theology challenges all repressive forces that impede the struggle of black woman to survive and to develop a positive, productive life for the freedom and welfare of the family and women. Womanist theory stands against all oppression on the basis of race, gender, class, sexual preferences, and physical abilities. (63).

According to Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, "Womanism is, therefore, a feminist term, which reacts to the perceived non-inclusion or representation of black women's perspective in feminist matters ... A womanist is a woman who loves women and appreciates women's culture and power as something that has universal significance" (3).

Using the theory of womanism, the research tends to suggest a means of liberation for the women in Africa – Nigeria. Unlike the radical feminist group, there is still a means whereby collaborations can exist between the male and the female. There should not be a fight between men and women. In the words of Orjinta A. Chukwu, "in my opinion, the goals of the entire womanism engagements are as follows: we have agreed to pact with our Euro-American fellow women against men ... the only fellow alternative left for us is to go back the same way again, and we must come up to a compromise with the men." (3). It is only obvious that none of the genders can exist on their own. Just like the adage that says "a tree does not make a forest". At present and even in the past, men take the higher ratio in most activities that represent power but the fact remains that men cannot achieve their political goals without the support of women. This is evident when during political rallies, you see the political candidates of various parties visiting the marketplace and in the marketplace, you find both males and females and they will be making efforts to also

win the trust of the women to participate during the election hence, the need to inculcate women in political activities. Ulrike Taubner asserts “Thus, the different life context of women and men will be shared in the great commonality of a world life context and the different concern for men and women which can be pegged also at the size and scale of desirable social changes. The goal is equality between men and women.” (64)

Alice as cited in Orjinta defined womanism:

Womanism is to feminist as purple is to Lavendar; a black feminist or feminist of colour. A woman who loves other women, sexually and or/ non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility ... and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/ or non-sexually committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally Universalist (65).

The roles of women in the pristine days were prominently seen in their involvement in politics, economic activities among other things. The issue of whether men or women had equal rights and the same treatment during that time did not arise. The enviable social positions of the women at that time were noticeable. Orjinta further postulates that “the dual sex political system ensured that each sex managed its own matters and had its own kingship, institution, age grades, titles and secret societies ... in these societies, there was the “Omu” which is the institution of the queens. The “Omu” had the “Omu” society ...” (69).

Again, following the history of the activities of women in Africa during the pre-colonial era, women have never been described as housewives owing to their effect and efficient participation in the economic activities in the society which includes working alongside their husbands on the farm, carrying the farm produce to the market for sale among other things are enough to ascribe the women as economic contributors. Our culture has never defined the African woman as housewife because she contributes to the economic activities of her family; though not autonomous, but in complementarity with her husband. Hence, Nina Mba asserts:

The African woman excelled in trading, skills, artifacts, farming, animal husbandry, crafts, sorcery, and herbalism. In this way, she had property rights even though she was denied inheritance rights. Since economic prowess was the key to social and political access in the traditional African culture irrespective of sex, men and women complemented each other’s efforts in economic acquisition by dint of hard and sincere work. (13).

Women Marginalization and Political Empowerment in *More Than Dancing* by Irene Salami

The play is about a group of women that came together to fight marginalization. Against all odds presented to the women by the men folk not to achieve their political quest, they stood their ground and through determination and unity, they attained their political goal. The playwright systematically x-rayed the political position of women in Nigeria and highlighted how they are being marginalized. In line one, movement 5:

Bisi: ... look at the table ...how many women do you see up there? The seats are filled with men. Where are the women? Where are the women I ask? Look at us, ... applauding the winning team. Look at us ... dancing and collecting two bags of rice, one bag of salt, one carton of Maggi cubes and two wrappers to be shared among thirty-five women (1).

The above dialogue has displayed the position of women as placed by the men. The playwright was able to present the fact that women were qualified as elements for entertainment and could only achieve certain limited goals. It further portrays the sub-conscious classification of women by the male folk. The value of women is not seen as earned but they are valued by the selfish interest of men. Looking at the financial benefits the men in politics stand to gain when compared to the peanuts they share with the women – two bags of rice, one bag of salt, one carton of maggi cubes, and two wrappers. This implies that women are not regarded as intellectuals thus, have nothing to offer politically. On the contrary, women have a lot to offer as could be seen in the act of mobilizing women during elections proving the relevance of women in politics and this relevance is not limited to just casting votes.

After the exposition of the position of women in the political society, the writer further made a call to women to wake up and see for themselves that they are being dragged to the mud. The author further revealed that the actions of the men are all conscious and intentional as seen in movement one, line 15:

Bisi: ... women, these are distractions. These are meant to perpetually keep us in a subordinate position. United People's Liberation Party is a party for men, dominated by men, and safeguarded by men. Men are Chairman Persons, Secretaries, Vice Chairpersons, Treasurer ...they are members of the board of trustees. Then, we remembered as women leaders ... the liberation is for only men, not for women. Yet, when it is time for election, women are mobilized to vote ...(2).

The conscious attempt of men not giving women strategic political positions in their political party and electing them to hold strategic positions in public offices is considered

marginalization. The continuous appointment as “woman leader” is a strategy by the men folk to continuously distract women from the main political business hence, the act is deliberate and it is marginalization. Therefore, in line with the purpose of the research, women should not just simply accept the fate that men folk have relegated to them but they should stand up for their rights. Movement one, line 27:

Bisi: Women, this is not the time to dance. Stop dancing ... think about your future. Think about the future of your daughters. For how long must we be denied our constitutional rights? We must wake up from our complacency ... you must realize that it is your fundamental human right to participate in governance. This is a democratic dispensation. Democracy is for all. It is for women as much as it is for men ... (2).

When the women finally made up their minds to fight for their fundamental human rights, the men rose with their discouraging words and moves as seen in movement one, page 3.

Sani: Madam Bisi, you have gotten the whole story mixed up ... Nobody has ever said women cannot rule ... leadership is for all ... but remember politics costs money.

Ebele: Alhaji, enough of that. You can no longer scare us with that. It is already a time-worn tale. We have heard it over and over again. Money is no longer a barrier to us. We are equal to the task (3).

There is also an admonition to back up words with actions in terms of women folks fighting for their political freedom in the play Movement One;

Hakeem: It is so, Femi. Women my advice to you is not to end up talking but also to back up your words with actions. Let us see a demonstration of this new consciousness in practical terms.

Nona: Thanks, Mallam Hakeem your point is noted ...(4).

In movement one, page 5 Sani expresses that women cannot handle the stress of politics. Nona reassures them that women do not lack strength but they need encouragement. In addition to the expressed encouragement needed by the women, the women in movement two, page 15 exhibited a sense of cooperation among themselves as seen when Aisha whom was elected by the women to be their presidential candidate stepped down for Prof. Ononghosa not by force as mostly experienced nowadays but out of her own will. Movement two, page 19:

Aisha: Ladies, I appreciate your confidence in me ... I deeply appreciate your confidence in me... I sincerely feel that Nona is a better candidate ... my decision is not based on her educational background but on her person and on what she stands for. I am not intimidated in any way by her intellectual capacity. I do

realize that in a time like this, we will need someone with all the attributes of Nona. For some personal reasons, I would not like to stand for an election for now and hereby step down for Prof. Ononaghosa Odaro ... (15).

The Playwright in Movement Four portrayed that most men are wholly convinced that women cannot come together to agree on a common goal;

Jeta: Friends, let us be careful; the women may be up to something.

Sani: They are up to nothing. Give them two weeks, they will scatter and be at one another's throat.(...)

On the Contrary, the stepping down of Aisha for Prof. Nona portrays the fact that women can as well reason together to reach certain goals as men. Those women can gather themselves and have some sense of togetherness and cooperation among themselves. Unlike the normal cliché that women always fight themselves and that they cannot organize themselves as portrayed in movement two;

All: (They all rise clapping and singing) Yes, ooo, it is acceptable to us.

Bisi: This is indeed, democracy in action. (Embraces Aisha and then Nona) I congratulate you both. You are women of honour and virtue. (15).

Marginalization was equally made evident in the play when the women were not given the chance to present a female Presidential candidate and the men folk went to qualify the women as visionless beings who can be distracted by mere simple tricks.

Madu: What led to this sudden desire for power?

Sonsare: They say they are tired of dancing. They claim they are being marginalized.

Madu: Well, if they are tired of dancing then let's look for something else for them to do. The whole essence is to distract their attention from power. (31).

The above dialogue clearly shows the conscious attempt of men to distract the women from the quest for power. This could be based on their ideology that political power is solely a man's affair which led to their thinking that the participatory intent of women is an intrusion in the affairs of men. Movement four;

Jeta: You must realize Keem that the participatory rights for women are for many men a strange concept. Give us some time to get used to it.

Balat: No, forget it. We will never get used to it. Politics is men's domain women are intruding. Madam Bisi has confused them ... (31)

If only women can come together as one, they will not be defeated easily but instead achieve greater goals. The fact that women are being marginalized cannot be over-emphasized but the issue is what has the women done about this marginalization issue. Crying out is not the solution but they should spring into action. In movement six of the play, the women were seen together to fight their common cause by joining forces through raising substantial funds for the support of their fellow woman who has been nominated for presidential candidate;

Garos: Nona, our women have brought this donation to empower you so that you can win at the polls: when you emerge victorious, don't forget that your mission shall be to protect the interest of women.

Nona: My women, I am overwhelmed. Not just for the donations, but also for your large turnout. I am indeed very grateful. Posterity will remember your sacrifices. If we continue to be united this way we will go a long way. There is power in unity. There is power in number. There is power in number. Let us stand together. Men believe we can never unite. Let us bring our differences aside for once and surprise them ... (52).

Men are actually denying the fact that women can do well in politics as they know it within themselves but they have refused to openly admit it. This was seen in movement nine;

Sani: Na shugauku. I am beginning to worry. The market women are a formidable force in any African society; if you lose their support then you are in for trouble:

Madu: I am surprised at you, Alhaji ... you have suddenly become faint-hearted ... there is no combined force of women that can withstand the weakest opposition of men. Please come on and let's re-strategize.

Jeta: Madu, you are deceiving yourself. Women have power. Do not underestimate them. There is what we call a silent revolution. It happens underground; before you know it, the change has taken place ... (74).

Probably, most women accept this marginalization because they lack confidence. But you wouldn't cast all blame on them as right from childhood all they have been taught is how men are in charge of everything, or how you are not to question the authority of a man or to speak in the midst of men. Movement eleven:

Nona: Our women are discouraged, Mama Nigeria. Most of them lack confidence in themselves. They have imbibed the traditional belief that men are the "born" leaders and as such they do not stand a chance against them at the polls so "why bother to contest?" (85).

In reaction to the above-mentioned problem, Mama Nigeria advised that the confidence of women should be built upon and those women should learn how to believe in them-selves and in what they can do. Movement eleven:

Mama Nigeria: Nona you have a lot to do, llan ways of building confidence in women. With determination women can reach the highest level in government ... you have to mobilize dedicated people who are ready to make sacrifices and go all the way with you. Map out good strategies and move ahead. (86).

Women stood together in one voice in movement twelve of the play thereby pointing out that the only way to conquer marginalization against women is through standing together and recognizing the fact that unity among a group of people is a faultless strategy in fighting any given course. There is also an exemplary movement displayed by the women in the same movement where admonition is expressed to say no to bribery. It has been observed through the years of Nigerian politics, that participants are active because of what they will gain. The men tried to get the women to stay on their side by promising to appoint women into prominent public offices and offered cash of thirty million. The women stood their ground and refused to be bought over by men because if they did they would have ended up selling their rights which would have made all their agitations a waste of time. In movement fourteen;

Balat: It's too late. You can't stop them now; the women have fooled us. In fact, the Chairman, some governors, and some other members of the National Assembly are there with them in the stadium. Ambassador Odaro is solidly behind his wife again ...

Madu: ... Chineke me eee. This is all a ploy. We called them coconut brains; we thought they were daft, foolish, ha! Women have truly come of age. See how they have fooled us ... (102)

The solidarity of women finally paid off because in the end, the United People's Liberation Party (UPLP) with Odaro Nona as the Presidential flag bearer pulled 15,500,000 votes.

Match against Women Marginalization in Ahmed Yerima's *Orisa Ibeji*

The story is about twin brothers who were separated at birth because of the rule in the kingdom that twins are not born into the palace to avoid the struggle for the throne. Oblivious of this fact, Oba Adedigba gave the order for the assassination of Tayelolu who is his twin and the goddess of twins came by herself to avenge his death. It still remains a standing fact that women are being marginalized in our country. The researchers are aiming to prove that despite the marginalization, women can always stand their ground

and make some positive moves to make better the given circumstances. As cited in Ahmed Yerimain *Orisa Iriisa* two strong female characters took the bull by the horns to solve a given problem. The characters of Akuda and Titubi stood in the face of danger and made some drastic decisions that caused both their lives instead of sitting and crying their lives out, they stood firm to save that which they hold dear to them. In the case of Titubi, she sacrificed her life to bear an heir to the throne of Oba Adebimpe:

Titube: Yeye, I have gone this far. I cannot turn backnow. If Esu Odara wants my head after I have sighted my son, he can have it. If he wants my heart even, he can pull it out of me. I pledge my life to make Kabiyesi happy and fulfilled. He has shown me kindness; I must be the wife who gives him his heart's desire. Do it for us, Yeye. (64).

The character of Akuda is celebrated as a powerful and courageous woman by her people. In the face of danger and vigorous emotional trauma, she was able to make a decision that saved the lives of the two innocent children.

Akuda: Believe me I did what I did to your lives. I swear! But before everything happened, I extracted a renewal of the oath from Ilari Akanji (47).

Unlike the traditional characterization of women to be weak in the face of danger, the character of Akuda exhibited enormous courage that elevated her above most men; to this end, she earned a great name;

Adedigba: ... But as woman, you rose to become a myth. Abijawaera they call you. Obirin bi okurin. JavajugaAkudaEje, tiinnpaokurinkun.

Akuda: ... still, if only they knew the pains I took to earn that chant (53).

The above dialogue has explained in simple terms that the road to success is not an easy one, but not an impossible thing to achieve for women. The character of Akuda scaled through a lot of hurdles to achieve her goals just as could be seen in the male counter paths. Leadership entails taking some drastic steps and decisions to achieve a certain goal. In order to provide an heir to the throne and save the lives of the innocent children, Akuda had to separate the twin boys at birth; in addition she committed murder in order to ensure that her secret remained firm;

Akuda: ... Quickly, I wrapped the birth sack into a calabash, wiped the place clean, called Ilari to take Tade out and bury the two of them.

Adedigba: The two of them?

Akuda: Iyun and Tade. To keep the secret dealed, they both had to die. I promised them freedom. Death was the ultimate freedom for a slave. I had them killed. (52).

Conclusion

Though the marginalization of women in Nigeria is still evident, women folk should not see it as an avenue to retire to the background but should take up the decision to keep fighting until they are recognized and appropriately placed. At present, women are selected for public office but at a very slow pace; a speed one could say is sluggish. There should be no relaxation, the match to be appropriate in society is still on and the women folk should be encouraged. This research aims at reawakening the interest to fight the marginalization of women and to make a clarion call to women to wake up and make the decision not to be placed in the background but to take a bold step to make a positive change as seen in the female characters of the two plays.

The researchers join the host of other women to encourage the women folk to work hard in attaining the goal of being recognized positively in every ramification of society, be it in the family, government, and other places as suggested by Salami in *More than Dancing*; “we celebrate when a woman becomes a governor, the senate President, the Vice President or even the President; then we shall go to the street and celebrate. For now, let us pray, plan, and strategize” (xi).

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