

Odutokun's Perception: The Status of Women in the Nigerian Society

John OTU Ph.D./Lami Nuhu ADI-GANI

Department of Fine and Applied Arts

Federal College of Education

Zaria

ozovehe@gmail.com

Abstract

A growing number of individuals and agencies continue to make practicable attempts at addressing the challenges faced by the female gender. Artists, are not left out of their salient contributions to the move to reduce and end gender violence of various degrees. Gani Odutokun, through his paintings has also attempted to reveal the problems faced by the female gender commonly based on male-centered bias, physical and harassment among others. This article relies on the common ground theory, womanism and liberal feminism as a vehicle to tease out the nuances presented in Odutokun's paintings he made with an attempt to address the issue bordering around the negative status of some women across the Nigerian society.

Keywords: *feminism, womanism, experiences, gender, artist*

Introduction

One of the key challenges in Nigerian art historical research is the evident unwillingness to write about artists in their life time. Art historians and art educators to a large extent are generally shouldered with the responsibility of identifying and documenting works of every visual artist with the aim and purpose of creating a repository of each artist from a wide variety of perspectives. This must have prompted Ikpakronyi (2007: 1) to decry the low response to writing by Nigerian Art Historians thus,

The pity is that, we do not have enough detailed or well-preserved records for adequate and proper documentation on Gani Odutokun-artist, teacher, philosopher and experimentalist of various media of art-and we, as art critics/commentators, researchers, educationists and administrators are the power for this. The problem basically, is that although we have a few items, by way of exhibition brochures and catalogues with information on this multi-talented artist, we do not have enough materials for a really meaningful assessment of his life and works.

This assertion has not changed despite the number of Art History and Art Education graduates churned out of the tertiary institutions annually. Perhaps, a review of the course content will go a long way in bringing lasting solution to the dearth of scholarship on living artists so as to develop a potent repository of the artist's works. Artists have always presented a growing variety of the status, perception and condition of the woman. This is done for the sole aim of addressing the challenges they face in the society so that there can be legislation to prevent the problems inflicted on them most especially by men. However, some artists that present the image of the woman as a totem sexual symbol to the delight of any willing buyers.

The focus of this article is centered on the works of Gani Odutokun (d. 1995) as the authors of this study are not aware of how much work has been done on the artist while he was alive considering the large number of works, he made while he practiced, exhibited and taught Painting at the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Odutokun has made some paintings and in

some other media with the woman as subject. The female subject in the perception of some artists, this article reiterates have sometimes been that of an object that suggests weakness, sex, despondent mother, a cook and seldom a leader. While for those artists that have portrayed the female in a seeming positive light of passivity is typified in some of the works of Kolade Oshinowo; not presented in this article.

Oshinowo presents such women in a trite like seated posture with an expressionless face, and modest type of Yoruba blouse and wrapper. He perhaps attempts to emphasis the calm disposition of many women, yet the passive pose he presents them in makes them look like a gender that is merely a listener that is always waiting to be told what to do. But for Odutokun, he portrayed the very essence of the variety of experiences they went through, as caused by many men. The selected works for this article are taken from a curated posthumous brochure of works published in Odutokun's honor in 2007. The space made available to a man and a woman in most cultures continues to be a contentious issue in every culture and race, mostly to the detriment of the female gender of all ages. This claim for space starts from the tender age of a female child at conception until she dies. Odutokun, perhaps, aimed at reiterating the need to engender a liberating way of life for the woman where she must always be protected from been emotionally hurt, and prevented from bodily harm.

Gender violence continues to be discussed at a variety of forums with the intention to achieve an equilibrium where the female is without any sentiments treated as a person. In movies, plays, poems, novels and some visual arts, the plight, required place and redefined role of the female continue to be addressed. This article presents eight randomly selected works chronologically with an attempt at tracing an antecedence of Odutokun's thought aimed at reimagining the person of the woman across any divide. Though his works do not necessarily present these variety, yet one can infer such nuances in the works he made.

Both genders have their spaces biologically predetermined for them, while, cultural values and precepts are being deconstructed to engender mergers that require more of the male gender to compromise his unduly claimed spaces. This compromise ranges from stopping female genital mutilation, female virginity practices, male centered land and property ownership, leadership roles in today's modern society, decrying the distaste for the female child, equal emoluments for both gender among others. All these and more are the types of idiosyncrasies being taught in schools so as to continuously amend socio-cultural practices that had made it absolutely difficult for the female gender to be treated as a subject instead of an object.

Nwapa (2007: 527) avers

The woman's role in Africa is crucial for the survival and progress of the race. This is, of course, true of all women across the globe, be they black or white. I would like to give examples of the crucial roles that Igbo women play in their communities...the powerful role of women as Umuala...Peace-making is an important function of Umuala, Umunwunyeobu, and the women's age grades.

The status of the woman and their role in the development and growth of the African and Nigerian societies can therefore not be overemphasized as enthused by Nwapa. These roles have grown to have politicians, administrators, musicians, actors, and the armed forces among others. However, the essence of this is to assess the intuitive mind of Odutokun's message on the challenges faced as he constantly showed concern through his work at a time when women openly and secretly suffered undue hardship under some males.

Again, Nwapa's writing still shows evidence that emphasizes the need to stay vigilant in the face of seeming improvement in the way women are treated. Nwapa (ibid: 540) adds further that "If writers took time to explore the circumstances, the pressures and the deprivations that their characters suffer, this would soften the social conscience and society's scales of justice would shift towards the correct justice." It is this thought that can be inferred to have formed the thrust of Oduokun's works on the woman and girl as he revealed the sufferings, he had observed through some of the works presented. He also added the need for the required due attention that needs to be paid to the female gender in one of his works.

Theoretical framework

As a vehicle to support this article, the authors draw from Lorber (1997: 9) where she explains that:

The main contribution of liberal feminism is showing how much modern society discriminates against women. In the United States, it was successful in breaking down many barriers to women's entry into formerly male-dominated professions, helped to equalize wage scales...it was somewhat more successful in proving the even if women are different from men, they are not inferior.

Liberal feminism holds that people are created equal and that culture and attitudes of individuals are the reasons for promoting gender conflict and no one benefits from a gender being subordinate to the other. To this end, equal opportunities should be created for both males and females in all spheres of life. Some female scholars have also chosen 'womanism' coined by author and activist Alice Walker in a 1982 publication titled *in search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist Press* as a term that best describes the type of experience women face as a departure from the western ideology of what women suffer.

Izgarjan and Markov (2012: 305,310) explain that:

At the center of womanism is the concern for women and their role in their immediate surroundings (be it family, local community or work place) and more global environment. Walker defines a womanist as a "black feminist or feminist of color" who loves other women and/ or men sexually/ or non-sexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength and is committed to "survival and wholeness" of entire male and female. Precisely because it provided a broader framework than feminism, many prominent female scholars and writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba Mirian Tlali identified themselves as womanists as a paradigm in their analysis of the texts of women from ethnic or economically undeveloped countries.

The desire of black women to express their personal and detailed shared African experience has made them to choose the term as it is viewed as a broader term that is not biased but all-encompassing of all women. It is advanced that black women's experience is better viewed and approached with the various delineations and agencies that are peculiar to the diverse ethnic and racial differences that is inclusive of women of color. The aim of this article is to rethink the need to

study possible gender related issues in the artist's works. While the objectives are to identify the variety of the societal status of the female, and to tease out the parallel ideological thoughts on gender issues from other scholarships. This article employs descriptive method as it relies on the paintings made by the chosen artist to explain the thrust of the article. It is purposive as the article is not aware of any other article that may have been written on the artist's feminist intentions as it relates to the works made. The artist has produced a large number of works but this article pays attention to the works where the female imagery has been used to express his thought on issues surrounding the female gender and the experiences they physically and emotionally encounter.



Figure 1, Title: Samaru back street, Medium: Oil on canvas, Size: 71 x 122cm
Year: 1974, Source: Exhibition brochure titled Gani Odutokun: 1946-1995 A Legend of Nigerian Art,
p. 18

The landscape is dotted by some human figures with a conspicuous presence of a female figure in a blouse and wrapper walking across from the left of the painting. She is the only female in the painting at a time when women irrespective of their age, wore a dress without the need the present-day specifics of religious coverings. The woman's blouse is a short-sleeved type revealing most of her arm as she walks on towards a man dressed in a turban and big flowing gown common to some middle aged to elderly Hausa men. The village painted is not as peopled as it is today, as Odutokun reveals. There is a seeming restfulness, liberty and equity for the female gender despite the customary practice of courtyards that many of the women have stay in.

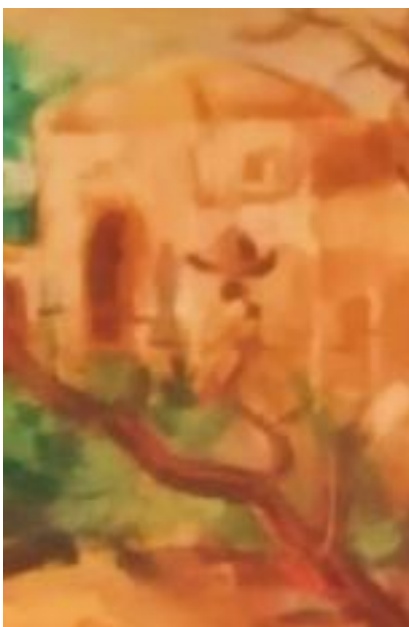


Figure 1a, Detail of painting in figure 1



Figure 1b, Detail of painting in figure 1

To the distant far right is a woman with a baby strapped to her back and a load of calabash as shown in figure 1a. Yet, just about the front of the woman is another woman wearing a blue dress in figure 1b; a blouse and wrapper. These are an indication of liberality for women at the time and Odutokun's is reminiscent of a time of uninhibited freedom for the female.



Figure 2, Title: Bukky's inspiration, Medium: Oil on canvas, Size: 91x 9cm, Year: 1993
Source: Exhibition brochure titled Gani Odutokun: 1946-1995 A Legend of Nigerian Art, p. xii

Odutokun in this painting attempted to advance the need to allow a more potent and active voice for the female child in the face of patriarchal curtains of restrictions. He had four daughters and clearly saw them as children, and to a large extent did not fill any vacuum of the absence of a male child. Eze and Chigbo (2018: 101) explain that

Igbo South-Eastern Nigeria has a cultural practice that places preference on male children to females...It is a patriarchal society where the birth of a male child brings loud joy and fulfillment to the family than that of a female-child birth.

This common ground reference might have inspired Odutokun to advance the need for the female child to get more attention than she had in the early 1990 when the painting was made. Though the artist was a Yoruba man, it is important to read the work beyond what ordinarily imagine was the artist's primary intention. Among the Yoruba, they have a saying that is offered in prayer to a newly wedded couple, when translated into English language goes thus '*You will give birth to both male and female*'. The preference for a male child is somewhat evidenced in a salient way that giving birth to a male child first, before a female child is rendered in the above statement. Moreover, Odutokun in the face of patriarchy insists on the need to pay equal attention to need and aspiration of a female child like it is done to the male child. The choice of dark colours is deliberate, as he suggests the need for the female child to be allowed to, as often as possible take center stage so as to enable her express her thoughts, desires and ambitions to her heart's content, just like is it for the male child. This article adds that one supposes that the name of the girl is from his eldest daughter Bukola, fondly called Bukky for short.

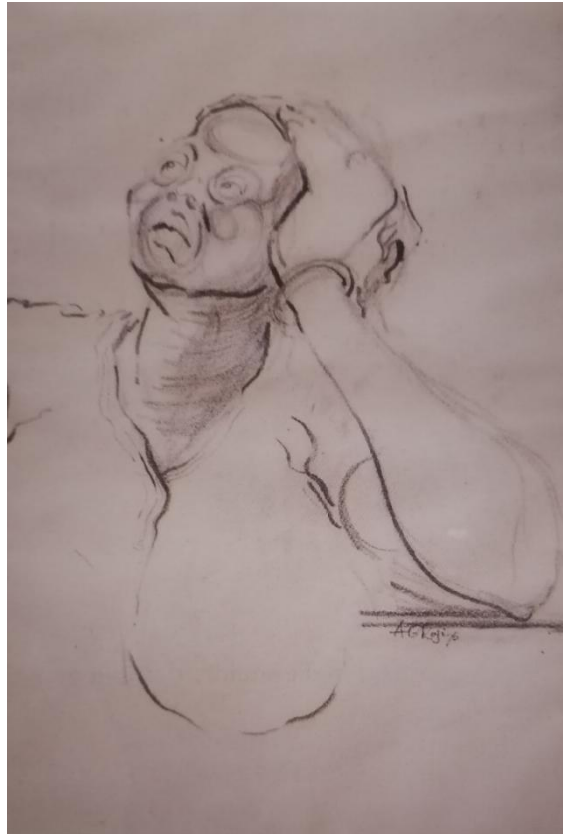


Figure 3, Title: Maria Contemplating, Medium: Pencil, Size: 43 x 30 cm, Year: 1975
Source: Exhibition brochure titled Gani Odutokun: 1946-1995 A Legend of Nigerian Art, p. 27

The drawing must have been made during a Master Degree drawing class, as it is peculiar of the models to be posed in this manner. Odutokun decided to represent the model at a close-up range as posed at the time with the aim of sending a message of the female capacity. Though some parts of the bust seem exaggerated, the purpose is perhaps aimed at making her fill up more space that is ordinarily made available to the female gender. The female, Odutokun suggests need to be inclusive, to the intent that she is presented to have the capacity to think deeply, especially contemplate rationally and intellectually without the man as indices to assess her strengths and weakness. Inference is drawn from Udoh et al (2020: 3) as they posit that

In different customs and traditions, which reflect various cultures across the world, have to a large extent affected the promotion and protection of the notion of women's rights. To be more precise, it has been argued that culture is often used as a tool for justifying the violation of women's rights especially in the areas of marriage and property, reflecting deep-seated patriarchal structures and harmful gender stereotypes.

This article presupposes that the manner in which Odutokun decided to make the model's face to look tense is an attempt at highlighting one of such situations where women contemplate what to do as they suffer one form of violation or the other.



Figure 4, Title: A study on Maria, Size: 45 x 25cm, Year: 1975

Source: Exhibition brochure titled Gani Odutokun: 1946-1995 A Legend of Nigerian Art, p. 18

The stature of the model ordinarily became an agency for Odutokun to change and challenge the narrative from the subjugated status the female is made to subsume. He re-presents her to become an independent spirit and persona that can be alone to think, rethink her situation in life and make a decision that enable her progress. Just like a man can sit in that same posture showing most of his legs uncovered, so can the woman, Odutokun must have advanced. Again, he makes the drawing of the woman to fill the space of the paper as a thrust for the female to advance her hopes, desires, aspiration and ambition. Though both works in figures 3 and 4 above were produced as class works, they have become works subjected to artistic scholarship for one to tease out possible nuances Odutokun may have perceived of the woman at the time.

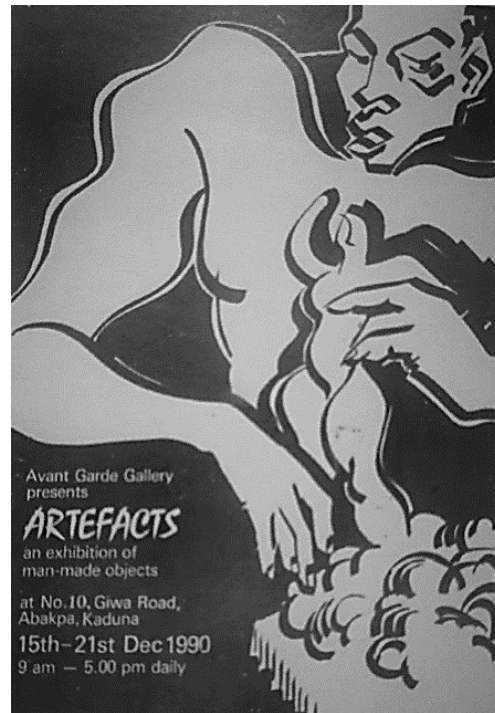


Figure 5, Title: The artefacts, Medium: Poster colour, Size: 56 x 41cm, Year: 1990
Source: Exhibition brochure titled Gani Odutokun: 1946-1995 A Legend of Nigerian Art, p. iv

Although the work is a poster colour work, the work may be misunderstood as the work of a chauvinist that believes in the abuse and domination of the woman. It represents a sculptor making the figure of a woman primarily, yet, his choice of concept can be read to be a pointer to his concern for the state of the woman. This work shares a similar compositional structure of another poster colour work titled '*Police brutality*' with a bold use of red to suggest death, danger and the brutality met on innocent victims of a handful of police officers. The gentile manner in which the male figure holds the small female figure to be emanating from the man's creative power suggests a yielding thrust of the woman because of the trust he has earned from her. Odutokun simply has a concern for the female gender and attempted to have reimagined the said concern into a practicable state of being where she accepted as a person without the aura of weakness and sexual perception that most male gender chooses to perceive her by.



Figure 6, Title: Man surrounded by his Dreams, Medium: Charcoal, Size: 74 x 57cm, Year: 1994
Source: Exhibition brochure titled Gani Odutokun: 1946-1995 A Legend of Nigerian Art, p. 26

Humanity has and continue to experience the condition in which some husbands detest their wives' inability to give birth to a male child. Odutokun in this drawing above sheds light on this by averring that a man's dreams are simply to get married to a woman and have children and ensure he protects them selflessly. He had four daughters and there is no evidence of any misgivings over the absence of a male child while he was alive. The vigour and energy with which the man in the drawing clutches the females show a sense of pride and dedication to protect and provide for them with all his being.



Figure 7, Title: King and Queen, Medium: Drawing, Size: 86 x 68cm, Undated
Source: Exhibition brochure titled Gani Odutokun: 1946-1995 A Legend of Nigerian Art, p. 54

Marriage, it is said to be the union between two consenting adults; perhaps, without any overbearing influences of a third party. Odutokun attempted to quiz the marriages contracted among royalty that are always aimed maintaining the tradition of the bloodline. The two subjects do not have any smiles on their faces, which brings to question what constitutes consent, between two people of the opposite sex that are matched. The firmness of the austere use of lines tells more of the absence of unity and love in the life of opulence, power, grandeur and the word choice. In research conducted to ascertain women leadership capacity against the men in the United States of America, Paustian-Vaderdahtal (2014: 1129) explain that

...a recent debate has emerged in popular press and academic literature over the potential existence of a female leadership advantage. This meta-analysis addresses this debate by quantitatively summarizing gender differences in perceptions of leadership effectiveness across 99 independent samples from 95 studies. Results show that when all leadership contents are considered men and women do not differ in perceived leadership effectiveness.

This research finding above is relied on to infer that the frown on both faces of the subjects in the drawing is a pointer to the tussle over whose ideas works better in a given situation. However, since around 1993 that the undated work was made, some women in Nigeria have continued to earn the right to sit on top various positions as executives, performing well within the ambit of requirements that are devoid of male-centered assessment model.

Conclusion

Odutokun used his artistic expression to attempt to tease out the way women of different ages are treated. He was evidently conscious of the gender bias that made it difficult, and in some cases impossible for some women to achieve their desired goals. Artists should therefore produce works that go beyond mere mastery of skill and technique but also rely on topical issues that can be addressed in the various aspect of the society with the aim of correcting the wrong decisions that continue to impact negatively on life and living. Odutokun employed the subversive approach to colour application and use of abstracted figures that also presents a thought-provoking appearance to viewers. Therefore, the status of the woman is still negative as they are perceived as the weaker of the two gender and thereby suggesting they be guided with great restriction by the man. The liberty that should be accorded the woman is also eroded by a transfer of the cultural perception into the modern era that has led to the various female centered advocacies that seek to advance more space and voice for the female at all age brackets.

References

- Eze, E. O., & Chigbo, K. (2018) Cultural Practices of Male Child Preference as a Determinant of Psychological Trauma among women in South-Eastern Nigeria. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*. <http://www.ijip.in> p. 101
- Ikpakronyi, S. O. (2007) Gani Odutokun and the problem of documentation in modern Nigerian Art *in* Gani Odutokun 1946-1995: A legend of Nigerian Art. Organised by the National Gallery of Art, Nigeria. Federal Ministry of Tourism, Culture and National Orientation, Abuja. An Exhibition curated by Simon O. Ikpakronyi and Jacob Jari.
- Izgarjan, A., Markov, S. (2012) Alice Walker's womanism: Perspectives, Past and Present *in* *Articles in Gender Studies*. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311780907> On 2/3/2022.
- Lorber, J. (1997) A variety of feminisms and their contribution to gender equality. Oldenburg University. Retrieved from <https://oops.uni-oldenburg.de/1269/1/ur97pdf> on 3/3/2022
- Nwapa, F. (2007) Women and Creative Writing in Africa *in* *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Edited by Olaniyan, T. and Quayson, A. Blackwell Publishing. Australia
- Paustian-Vanderdahl, S. C., Walter, L. S., Woehr, D. J. (2014) Gender and perception of leadership Effectiveness: Meta-Analysis of Contextual Moderators. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Vol. 99 No. 6 <http://do.doi.org/10.1037/a0036751>. p. 1129
- Udoh, O. D., Folarin, S. F., Isumonah, V. A. (2020) The influence of religion and culture on women's rights to property in Nigeria. *Cogent Arts and Humanities*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/oaah20>. p. 3