

RECONSTRUCTING A COMPROMISED PERCEPTION OF THE FEMALE THROUGH CARTOON STRIPS

JOHN OUT (PhD)

Department of Fine and Applied Arts

Federal College of Education

Zaria

Nigeria

ozovehe@gmail.com

Abstract

The female gender continues to become relevant in many key sectors of many nations' lives. However, the use of the female as a protagonist is not an easy choice as a protagonist due to the patriarchal nature of most races and cultures, and the cartooning field in particular. The study saliently reveals the exclusion of females from the cartooning profession with the aim of further accentuating the challenges faced by women. This has inspired the study to choose Aderonke Adesanya who uses the cartooning platform to challenge existing perception of who a woman is as case study. This she did to also challenge the subjugation of the female by male cartoonists that portray the woman as lacking the capacity to think intellectually vis-a-vis the ability to contribute to national issues. The feminist perspective through the female African lenses is mainly relied upon to set the tone of the study and analyze a random selection of four cartoon strips that depict a feminist view. The female cartoonist in this study boldly relies on the use of the female gender as a protagonist to reconstruct the poor perception of the woman through her cartoon strips.

Keywords: Reconstruction, Perception, Patriarchy, Gynocentric, Cartooning, Differences

Introduction

Studies carried out on cartooning in Nigeria make the female cartoonists seem as though they do not exist, and that women lack the creative capacity to make strips. Art historical studies on the history of cartooning in Nigeria leaves much to be desired, so as to close the yawning gap that increasingly lets the details on female cartooning get lost in time. The author of this article has completed a doctoral dissertation on the works of female cartoonists in 2015 titled *Rethinking the cartooning epistemology: the female cartoonists in Nigeria*. The study is premised on the problem statement that scholars exclude the works of female cartoonists from scholarly studies because they not exist. On conducting a fieldwork, the research is able to establish seven female cartoonists that have practiced the art form namely, Folashade Adebare; National Concord newspaper; now rested, Ronke Adesanya; Daily Sketch newspaper; now rested, Nigerian Tribune newspaper and Vanguard newspaper, Ijeoma Nwogu; Nigerian Tribune newspaper, Promise Adaora Onele; Post Express and The Sun newspaper, Emilia Onuegbu; The Punch newspaper, Gloria Joboson; Guardian newspaper and Uche Uguru; Nigerian Pilot newspaper. It is important to state that there are no female cartoonists practicing the art form.

The choice of Adesanya is inspired by her use of a female character to challenge the phallogocentric attitude of many authors and art creators. Aderonke Adesanya received a BA in Art Education from the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, while her MA in African Visual Arts and PhD in African Art History are

from the University of Ibadan. She practiced cartooning for over ten years and has authored books, essays and book chapters. She presently teaches African art history at the University of Ibadan, (Olaniyan, 2013). Attempts at reconstructing the poor perception of the female gender is not necessarily new but scarce to the cartooning scholarship. In Nigeria, Aliu Eroje uses a female character to prove women have the capacity to unequivocally make potent social commentaries to effect change. Political cartooning is mostly favoured by the few scholars that delve into cartooning scholarship, while a minute number rely on other familial cartooning art forms as a source of inspiration. Feminism as a tributary to tease out other scholarly sensibilities is equally new to cartooning scholarship. To this end, this article attempts to create a three item template that may be used to tease out feminist issues in cartooning. For example, Maxine Molyneux is a male cartoonist in Kenya's Daily Nation newspaper, and depicts a motherly female figure to challenge his country's poor perception of women and motherhood. Omanga (2011: 417) explains that "As a metonym of the Kenyan citizenry, the framing of Wanjiku confronts tensions that characterize the contradictions dividing the real world and the symbolic world, and in subtle ways provokes a reconstruction of the 'new woman'. The strips started after the post – election violence of 2007 and 2008 Kenya when women and children were attacked and killed as mere victims of an election that made the female gender a punching bag for venting anger as though that would suffice the loss of an election hinged on ethnic grounds. Several authors depict the woman as though the female gender lack the capacity to portend anything good and depicting women in gendered roles of cooking, child rearing and being a good wife.

Barker (2013) explains that

Feminists have argued that the subordination of women occurs across a whole range of social institutions and practices; that is, the subjection of women is understood to be a structural condition. This structural subordination of women has been described by feminists as patriarchy, a concept that has connotations of male-headed family, mastery and superiority (P. 290).

This structure plays out against women in the cartooning profession such that the female cartoonist seems invincible despite the waning strength of patriarchy. While in the cartooning scholarship, the works of female cartoonists are seldom mentioned even though they practiced the art from alongside male cartoonists. Brown in Aidoo (1998) holds that "African women writers are: 'the voices unheard, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and predictably male-oriented studies in the field.'" The socio-cultural effect of this is however giving way for many women to find themselves in positions that were primarily perceived as places strictly made for men. Adesanya through her strip presented below attempts at proving the equal capacity and effect a female protagonist will have in place of a male. Storey (2012) posits that "Liberal feminism...see the problem in terms of male prejudice against women, embodied in law or expressed in the exclusion of women from particular areas of life". This

exclusion she fights by presenting the woman as a protagonist in order to suppress the existing stereotype by using a female character in the body of works presented in this study. For example, a strip she shares with Dada Adekola, a male cartoonist in the Vanguard newspaper titled *Regina* is one in which she presents a pictorial drama of a woman's life challenges as she goes about her normal life. At one point or the other, *Regina* confronts a man with repudiation to prove her worth as a woman that deserves to be treated as a person.

Most of the works produced by most male cartoonists are phallogentric in their thrust and depiction and this leaves the woman out of the possibility of having the capacity to affect and impact the changing world positively. Nwapa averred that (1998: 527) "Male authors understandably neglect to point out the positive image of womanhood, for very many reasons which I will not attempt to discuss...Recent changes in Nigeria,... and an emphasis on the education of women-have affected men's views about women. Women have started to redefine themselves; they have started to project themselves as they feel they should be presented." This redefinition of the person of the woman is what this study finds worth studying in the selected works of Adesanya with the aim of making aware of the built capacity in the works of female cartoonists.

In order to read a feminist scholarship in cartoons, this study attempts to achieve this with the following items below derived from Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie and Flora Nwapa's (d. 1993) thoughts.

- i. Frequency of depiction of a female character in a cartoonist's body of work. A cartoonist's work can be studied by counting the number of time a female character is depicted in a given number of strips.
- ii. The role of the female gender in a cartoonist's body of work. From the cartoonist's works, the works that depict females performing various roles are either serially or randomly selected from the repository of works produced. The indices below should be used:
 - a. Dependency on the male
 - b. Male pleaser
 - c. Cajoling the male
 - d. Use of self-defeating words
 - e. Depicted mute in the face of male oppression
 - f. Succumbing to male patriarchy
 - g. Succumbing to self-crippling thoughts, attitude and actions
- iii. Intended perception of the female(s) depicted
 - a. Phallic depiction-how well is/are the female(s) dressed, alone and among men in the strip
 - b. Femme fatale-how often is the female portrayed as a villain in the chosen cartoonist's work.

- c. Male-propelled heroine and initiative-to what extent does the female show a mental capacity to being independent, perform on extraordinary feat.
- d. What is the cartoonist's general view of the female personae?

Nwapa goes on to add that "...there have been female portraits of sorts presented by men from their own point of view, leading one to conclude that there is a difference between the African male writer and his female counterpart (p. 12). A balanced view of who gender is best achieved when one or more that particular gender writes about the challenges they face. This is presented to the reader such that the specific and overall message intended by the cartoonist is not lost. In seeking a balanced view of a woman is, Ogundipe-Leslie (1998: 545-7) explains what feminism is not below,

1. Feminism is not a cry for any kind of sexual orientation...
2. Feminism is not the reversal of gender roles, gender being defined simply as socially constructed identities and roles...
3. Feminism is not...wanting to be a man as they like to say to us...or, "whatever you do, you can never have a penis. "A car mechanic once told me that I could not fix my car because I did not have a penis."
4. Feminism is no necessarily oppositional to men
5. Feminism is not "dividing the genders..."
6. It is not parrotism of Western women's rhetoric...
7. It is not opposed to African culture and heritage, but argues that culture is dynamically evolving and vertically not static
8. Feminism is not a choice between extreme patriarchy on the one hand or hateful separatism from men or the other.

The above points elicits from both gender to understand the need for a balanced perception of cultural, traditional and societal constructs they both participate in actively and passively. Hypothetically, there are practices such as female genital mutilation, shaving of the widow's hair that some women that have experienced such continue to hold on to so as not to be the one that will end the practice out of guilty feeling.

Body of work and analysis

Four strips have been chosen for the analysis and this is based on the feminist perspective that her use of a female character is depicted as having agency. The choice of the name *Clayfeet* is not clear; as the cartoonist has not responded to her electronic mails. However, it might be read as a metaphor to imply that a woman needs to be resolute in her opinion, perception and stance over any socio-political issue. This is premised on the thinking of the "man's world" mantra that is presently thinning in favour of the female

gender. The depictions under study generally aver that female can equally function effectively and efficiently in both open spaces and enclosures without the man's patriarchal mindset.

For this, Stuller (2012) avers that

A more general, yet equally important, method for critiquing the representation of women in popular culture-and for the purposes of this exercise, in comics-involves considering the following in our investigation: How do we look at women? Do we see them as fractured body parts (e.g. breasts, buttocks, legs) or as whole figures? Do we see them as sexual objects for the pleasure of others, or as individuals and how are their bodies positioned?...The bodies of women in mainstream comics tend to be fetishized, receive more focus on cleavage or derriere rather than an active whole...and are typically drawn in physically impossible positions that manage to display both their breasts and their rear ends (P. 237).

Adesanya's paradigm shift over the perception of a woman runs parallel to Stuller's inquiry. It reveals the male inspired perception that is presented through various media such as film, novels, visual arts and cartooning in particular. Moreover, a handful of these media of expression depict the woman in good light until some decades ago when a handful of authors in their various fields began to accept the need for a reconstruction of the poor or wrong perception of the female character. She depicts Clayfeet as an unattractive woman that has thick lower limbs similar to a sufferer of elephantiasis; figures 2 and 3. Yet, her strips imply the capability that lies in a woman to think and speak intelligibly. Over three decades ago in Nigeria in particular, a gender sensitive slogan started making rounds, 'what a man can do, a woman can do'. This became a practiced ideology that soon led to the first female senator, first female vice-chancellor and the first female minister. In the field of cartooning the depiction of women as protagonists is evident and replete in Adesanya's strips, such as *Virginia*; not presented in this study.

It is important to add that Stuller holds:

...the Bechdel Test is a more colloquial than academic term, yet one which proves useful in critical context. The text requires that the story has

- two or more women;
- that these women talk to each other; and
- that they talk to each other about something other than men.

This is useful because most stories featuring one or more male characters will have a token female who serves a traditionally feminine, and often less important role: love interest, damsel in distress, character, family member or femme fatale (P. 238).

The strip in figure 1 runs parallel with the first item of the *Bechdel Test* in that it depicts two women having a conversation on a socio-political issue, while, though they talk about a man, they do this with an attempt to elicit a right perception from the man. This is a far cry from the phallocentric dimension and

mindset the female character is mostly subsumed to have, instead of the existing ability to make value judgments.

Barker holds that:

...hegemony has to be seen in relational terms and is inherently unstable. Hegemony is a temporary settlement and series of alliances between social groups that is won and not given. Further, it needs to be constantly re-won and renegotiated. Thus culture becomes a terrain of conflict and struggle over meanings. Consequently, hegemony is not a static entity; it is marked by a series of changing discourses and practices intrinsically bound up with social power (P. 68).

In these strips, Adesanya contests the existing hegemony with the aim of out rightly giving the female folk a voice that is basically as potent as that of a man. The use of a female as heroine and protagonist to express a thought or idea is not common, and coming from a woman makes it tangible for one to ponder over the thrust of her message without relying on a male platform to discuss her works. The works are however discussed on the merits of their import which is the society she lives in.

This attempt at the reconstruction of the female gender continues on both gendered fronts so as to elevate mankind to a greater level of civility where the woman and man can be assessed on merit and not on any biological similarities or differences. This made Ngcobo (1998: 540) to posit that “Women should not have to be martyrs to win the respect of their societies. We are looking for a self-defining image of women who win respect in their own right because they are strong and achieve things in their lives and triumph, not only because they are men’s wives or mothers of sons but because they are valued members of their societies,...These portrayals will in time focus correctly on the values that our societies uphold and preserve.” Adesanya made a strip she titled *innuendo* that attempts to challenge the male-centered world that makes the woman less than her actual worth. *Innuendo* and as the word suggests, is an act of making a comment about somebody or something usually implying something bad or rude. For this, she relies on the use of a female character to reconstruct the poor perception of a woman over a presumed inability to speak intelligibly. In this strip in figure 1 she lampoons a former president, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo over his promise to improve food supply in the country.



Figure 1 INNUENDO... with Clayfeet, Ronke Adesanya, Vanguard newspaper, Source: <http://africacartoons.com/ronke-adesanya-innuendo-1>

Adesanya uses a female character as a representative of the masses and draws on this by depicting a market woman that expresses her dismay over the rising price of food items that has led to food shortage. In the second panel, they both debate to sit and do nothing, or take action that will make positive things happen. In the third panel, she lashes out at the Obasanjo sarcastically. By this, she hits at the target in the less iconic depiction making it clear that the abundance he sees on his farm at harvest should not be misunderstood to be the same output in the country. To this end, she raises the need for practicable solutions that can be experienced throughout the country.

Clayfeet's neighbor in the third panel is morbid with frustration as she ponders at the bleak future the satiric solution suggested offers. It is vital to point out that the lower right corner of the third panel reveals that Adesanya actually makes her depictions directly on her strip without a preliminary sketch. It simply shows that she works straight away with her pen, as this instead requires editing, so as to have a finish devoid of such preventable error. When the one time governor of Zamfara State, Alhaji Ahmed Yerima; now a senator, attempted at enforcing the Sharia law in the state, he began by implementing this while the National Assembly deliberated over the possibility of having it approved but was later turned down.



Figure 2 INNUENDO... with Clayfeet, Ronke Adesanya, Vanguard newspaper

Source: <http://africacartoons.com/ronke-adesanya-innuendo-4>

Adesanya boldly depict this with a salient outcry against the negative perception of a woman's ability to comment on a socio-political issue. She opens her criticism in the second panel making it clear that the Sharia law in Zamfara state was not an idea that was well thought of. This she does by shedding light on the long term effect of the law as it will make it impossible to discover great goalkeepers from the state. In all the three panels Adesanya depicts Clayfeet against a background perhaps, to suggest the male-caste shadow that she must continue to attempt to overcome. In figure 3, she expresses her joy over the sacking of the onetime national team's technical adviser, Joe Bonfrere.

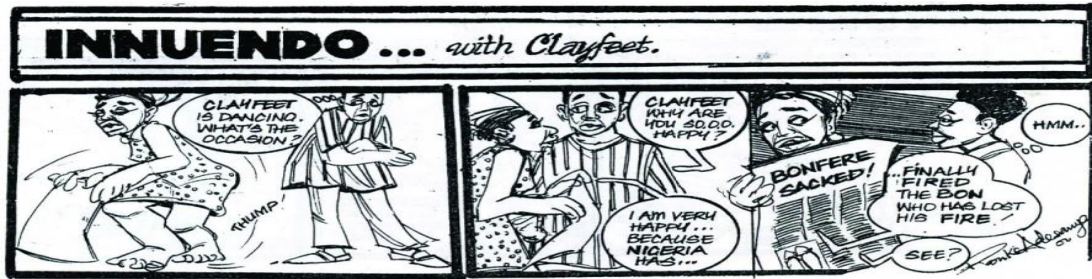


Figure 3 INNUENDO... with Clayfeet, Ronke Adesanya, Vanguard newspaper

Source: <http://africacartoons.com/ronke-adesanya-innuendo-3>

The strip starts with a dance which might take the reader by surprise and raising suspense. In the second panel, she uses the name Nigeria to suggest the general feeling of disappointment over Bonfere's performance at the time. It is worthy to note the introduction of a male figure in this strip. This is a pointer to the prominence she gives the female gender due to varying types of stereotype that is met against her effective mental capacity. Here, it is a woman that is not just reading a newspaper, but the sports section. This is to further prove that women, just like men have equal mental capacity to talk about sports and make value judgments too. While in the previous strip, she abstracted the group of men protesting the harsh Sharia law introduced in Zamfara state, while her protagonist female character holds a newspaper to further prove the capacity of a woman to read and think intellectually. In figure 4, Clayfeet does not appear in either of the two panels.



Figure 4 INNUENDO... with Clayfeet, Ronke Adesanya, Vanguard newspaper

Source: <http://africacartoons.com/ronke-adesanya-innuendo-2>

The stories in each panel convey a similar message in two distinct ways. In the first panel are two lovers debating over the decision of having sexual intercourse. She reveals the attempt at preventing the chance of contracting the dreaded Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) virus with a silly suggestion. By this, she presents the female gender in a good light since the women are always the ones that carry the pregnancy, and in the light of this, the weaker sex.

In the second panel, she did not spare many female University students depicted in the female character in the first panel that fail to dress decently. She employs the word 'Marketing' is an indication that the indecent dressing is aimed at luring men to bed so as to get money from them. In most of Adesanya's comics and strips, it is clear she attempts at presenting the female gender and image in a light replete with a greater degree of independence and competence. This differs from the stereotypical portrayal and

perception that makes the woman not capable of doing things without an above average input of the male gender. This though has the possibility of leading her work to be read as an attempt at liberating the constant derogatory stance that the woman is incapable of succeeding without, at least, a little input from the man. It is worthy to note that Adesanya applies the Aspect-to-Aspect type of presentation of strip on this dual panel. McCloud (1993: 72) explains that it "...bypasses time for the most part and sets a wandering eye on different aspects of a place, idea or mood." In this regard, the places in which the female character is seen are different on both panels, while, despite refusing coital sex with the man in the first panel, she is seen in the second panel in a skimpy dress flaunting her poorly covered body as she walks through campus. The mood perhaps, is that of wonder over why some young female students, though are not loose, yet, do not dress properly to show their true worth in morals and manners.

In the final analysis, the four strips made by Adesanya attempts at revealing the need to include the woman in a balanced perception that portray her as a gender that has the capacity to think, talk and act intelligibly. In setting the tone of what feminism is not, Ogundipe-Leslie has since formulated an acronym she calls STIWA that stands for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. She adds that it is an attempt at looking at the different challenges that makes the African and Western women's problems differ from each other. This study aligns her theory in the redefinition of feminism through an African perspective as it best describes Adesanya's strips presented in this study. This is why Sharma (2012:2) postulates that "The continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications – electronic, print, visual and audio – must be changed. Print and electronic media in most countries do not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world". This change is evident through the creative insight of Adesanya's feminist approach to her cartooning expressions. She takes advantage of her creative verve to depict a balanced imagery of how some ladies make themselves vulnerable to the wrong perception that seems not to abate soon. The female folk ought to take responsibility for the role they also play in the ongoing spate of the negative and degrading images of women in the media.

Nwapa (1998) adds:

Nigerian male writers have in many instances portrayed women negatively or in their subordination to men. Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* is a prostitute; Wole Soyinka's *Amope* is a ceaselessly nagging woman who makes life intolerable for her husband. Achebe's *Miss Mark* does not hesitate to put her sex appeal to work in order to attain desired objectives. J. P. Clark's *Ebiere* entices her husband's brother into a sexual relationship. The focus has always been on the physical, prurient, negative nature of woman. Woman's subordinate position is redressed (somewhat) in the name given to the heroine of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, *Nwabuife* ("Woman is Something")...The heroine, *Beatrice Nwabuife*, is a liberated and powerful woman,

leading one to surmise that she symbolizes perhaps a sudden awakening to the importance of woman-being (P. 528).

Inference is drawn from Nwapa's lucid description of the overtly phallocentric nature of the perception of who a woman is. This makes it seem as though their male counterpart is better or perhaps perfect, such that the woman and society at large must rely on the male gender for character rejuvenation. Through her body of work, there is greater and in other cases, a more prominent and contributory activity of the woman to national development. Ordinarily most strips made by male cartoonists depict the male as the only contributor to the growth and development of the overall human capacity. In this, Adesanya's depictions in turn points to the man as mere filler and a gender that relentlessly pursues a negative point of view when the aim is clearly counter-productive and generally destructive. The perception of who a woman is still hunts her adversely in some aspects of life in Nigeria. This however can be reduced overtime as the women have to take a supportive stance to decry the wave of negative perception.

Adichie (2009) holds that "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete...The consequences of the single story is this: it robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar." This difference that is emphasized in the yawning gap that is made to exist between both genders is what makes the woman to be wrongly perceived. The cartooning profession itself has not served the female gender well in that most of them have not had the long practice spell the men enjoy.

Conclusion

The tone of Adesanya's works is Gynocentric to the effect that it attempts at proving the evident value and place of the woman in the society. She does this by proving that the female gender has been fledged right from birth and deserves to be appropriately heard and treated well using a non-patriarchal view when assessments are made. The existing heteronormative patriarchy is a deep entrenched mindset that some women welcome in some societies to the detriment of the female gender. In this regard, her works clearly depict a parry that intends to disabuse readers' minds from that notion so as to widen the scope of female participation on the grounds of merit.

References

- Aidoo, A. A. (1998). To be an African Women Writer-an Overview and a detail in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (Eds.) Olaniyan, T. and Quayson, A. 2009 Blackwell Publishing, Australia.
- Adichie, C. N. (2009). The Danger of a Single Story, Retrieved on 2 May 2016 from http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en
- Barker, C. (2013). Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice. 4th Edition, SAGE Publications Ltd. London
- McCloud, S. (1993). Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, Harper Collins Publishers Inc. New York
- Nwapa, F. (1998). Women and Creative Writing in Africa in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* Olaniyan, T. and Quayson, A. (Eds.) (2009) Blackwell Publishing, Australia
- Ngcobo, L. (1998). African Motherhood-Myth and Reality in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (Eds.) Olaniyan, T. and Quayson, A. 2009 Blackwell Publishing, Australia
- Ogundipe-Leslie, O. (1998). Stawinism: Feminism in an African Context *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, Olaniyan, T. and Quayson, A. (Eds.) (2009) Blackwell Publishing, Australia.
- Olaniyan, T. (2013). Ronke Adesanya in *Africa Cartoons: Encyclopedia of African Political Cartooning*. Retrieved on 3 May 2016 from <http://africacartoons.com/cartoonists/map/adesanya-ronke/>
- Omanga, D. (2011). The Wanjiku Metonymy: Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Kenyan's Editorial Cartoons in *African Communication Research*. Vol. 4 No. 3
- Sharma, A. (2012). Portrayal of Women in Mass Media, *Media Watch An International Research Journal in Communication and Media*. [www.mediawatchglobal.com/wp - 6 content 29 July, 2015](http://www.mediawatchglobal.com/wp-content/2015/07/29/)
- Storey, J. (2012) Cultural theory and popular culture: An introduction. Pearson Education Limited. England
- Stuller, J. K. (2012) Feminism: Second-wave Feminism on the Pages of Lois Lane in *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan, (Eds.) Routledge. Taylor and Francis Group New York
- Vera, Y. (1998). Stawinism: Feminism in an African Context in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, Olaniyan, T. and Quayson, A. (Eds.) (2009) Blackwell Publishing, Australia