

THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN SELECTED WORKS OF CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN PAINTINGS

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Abstract

The painting genre of Fine Arts has become the most revered in Nigerian visual arts practice. This study is not aware of any culture in Nigeria that is not deep seated in patriarchy. In this regard, it delves into why the female image cannot be perceived to be active and intelligible in many depictions made by male and female painters. This study observes that some artists depict the female image with titles that do not send messages pertinent to the realities that affect the female gender. Instead, many of the works produced can be described as picture-making activities as the images do not encode any subversive message that can engender critical thinking in the viewer. This study relies on the negative narrative of the female common in some male authored literature as a parallel to discuss the images of the female depicted in the works of some six Nigerian paintings.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Women, Images, Male, Perception, Contemporary

Introduction

Patriarchy, to a large extent defines and describes most of the world's cultures and its practices. This male-centered life makes it so narrow for female of most ages to ever find a place in public view. The identity and perception of the female has, and continue to evolve due to the need to maintain a world view that is positive and fair in its treatment of the female gender in Nigeria. In contemporary Nigerian painting practice, the female image has become more prominent such that it necessitates the need to delve into its essence for its visual attainment. Gamman and Marchment in Storey (2012) "doubt the 'universal validity' of Muvely's argument that questions whether 'the gaze is always male' or it is merely dominant with a wide range of diverse ways of seeing, that includes the female gaze" (p.139). Perception of all things is informed by the family background, culture, religion and educational level.

Storey (ibid) explains that,

It is from popular culture that most people in our society get their entertainment and their information. It is here that women (and men) are offered the culture's dominant definitions of themselves. It would therefore seem crucial to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of intervention in popular forms in order to find ways of making feminist meanings a part of our pleasures (p.139).

These thoughts above and more are relied upon to tease out the import of what informs why some artists' paintings are dominated by female images without purpose. A good number of the imagery depicted most of the time is informed by the humble background of most of the painters. Many of the paintings made in the past forty years; from several exhibition catalogues accessed, show that there exists a narrative that depicts the female image in an accent to its physical appearance. Where the female image is depicted in semi-nude, titles are chosen to, perhaps, appeal to the sensibilities of the female and male viewer with examples of titles like *negritude*, *beauty themes*, *reclining figures* among others. Sexual objectification is evident in the depiction as they do not work parallel with the objective intended. From Ben Enwonwu to Yusuf Grillo, Rom Isichei and Olumide Oresangun, the depictions are mostly condescending instead of the appraisal of the equally built capacity a female has. In some of Grillo's paintings of the female image, he has depicted them as passive sex objects with titles like 'Yoruba woman', *Omo olomo*; a Yoruba word for a carefree person, *Kofo*; Yoruba shortened name for Kofoworola and *African woman with gele*. None of these titles show a positive perception of the female gender such that she can only be identified by her extrinsic value. The females depicted in each of his paintings are all slender and presumably tall, perhaps implying that being plump or fat is not adequate enough for his message. Obesity is evidently not a major health issue in Nigeria, yet, the fat and the plump women have been largely excluded as possible visual idioms in most paintings that may be relied upon to inspire positive perceptions of the female. The aim of the study is to reveal the passive perception some artists have of the image of the woman. The

objective of the study is to interrogate the depiction of women in the paintings of some Nigerian artists. It also attempts to assess whether artists make working drawings that lead to the final painting.

Theoretical framework

Among female Nigerian painters, many of them have, and continue to tow the narrative line of the stereotypical depiction of the female image. These include Sope Olorunfemi, Sade Adebawale, Ngozi Akande and Nnenna Enyiwa, whose depictions simply depict the female image in a passive and sexually objectified perception. The representational depictions of active figures are presented in non-dramatic renditions, and unintelligible thrusts. The reason for which a female is portrayed finds a parallel drawn from Nigerian literature in English. Literature, as a class of writings is distinguished for its beauty of expression in poetry, essays and history that contains knowledge. The modal logic of literature concerns itself with style and expressions as it draws from daily life for the purpose of teasing out nuances that impact lives and bear affinity to the visual arts of painting in particular. What literature does with words in its ideation of emotions and feelings, the painter does with depictions accompanied with colours to arouse the emotions of the viewer. As salient as these two fields are in parallel to each other, the difference allows a degree of possible inference to be drawn between both of them. Nwapa (2007) asserts that,

...Nigerian male writers, like Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, and Elechi Amadi, have all in their works played down the powerful role of women. Unlike Peter Abraham and Ousmane Sembene, Nigerian male writers have 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...The focus has always been on the physical, prurient, negative nature of the woman (P. 538).

Achebe however depicts a positive perception of the woman in his novel *Anthills of the Savannah* where Nwanyibuife (meaning Woman is something) proved the competence of the women. The perception that the female is depicted passively also draws from Keifer-Boyd (2010) who prescribes that,

Gather images that seem to contain gender specific objects...Present the contexts from different points of view, by visually manipulating the contexts using strategies such as denoting empty space, overlaying, spotlighting, and repositioning. Empty space is used to draw viewers' attention to what is missing. Overlay is used to layer other meanings onto a familiar object or image. Spotlighting is used to provoke viewers to question accepted ways of thinking by highlighting something in the image that they would normally minimize or marginalize. Repositioning is used to reverse, race, gender, social status, age, and other stereotyped identities (P. 10).

The theory propounded above aids the viewer of a painting to assume the position of a critic, which will ordinarily be more effective with a basic knowledge of the visual arts. The viewer is able to use this to decode the hidden messages in the painting and do this independently of what the artist has in mind, without taking the work out of context. It is important to note that, the absence of critics in galleries has made the production of art works a boundless exercise that seems to be unguided in its principles and cardinals of expression.

The artists and their works

Keifer-Boyd's theory is relied on to discuss the bodies of works by the six contemporary paintings that have been randomly selected from many that depict human figures in the representational style. They are assessed on the need to comprehend the intrinsic value of works produced relying on the idiom used and the title of work. Kolade Oshinowo (b. 1948) depicts two female figures of about the same height facing the same direction. As the title suggests, he has placed one, perhaps, the older of the two, in front of the other to further highlight the mark of respect that exists between them.



**Figure 1, Artist: Kolade Oshinowo, Title: *Sisters*, Medium: Oil on canvas, Size: 120 x 90cm
Year: 2010, Source: Nothing but the truth exhibition catalogue 2012**

The cadmium yellow pigment behind both sisters framed in by the dull hues of brown, green and blue, holds out hope for whatever their challenges and aspirations are. This, the artist perhaps, expects that they should both pursue together without the patriarchal reliance on anyone to progress in life. It is however not clear what he is trying to highlight within the society with regards to the relationship that exists in the his or someone else's culture. The bond that exists between sisters has not been observed to be on the decline in any of the cultures in Nigeria. Many siblings are known to pursue separate careers but with one basic goal of being able to earn a living and be independent financially. The sisters are depicted to face one direction and do not subversively indicate any message to be deduced by the viewer. It is not possible for an artist to depict a storyline the same way a poet or novelist can with words, yet, there are visual idioms that can be employed to express an idea of what he intends to portray through his title.



**Figure 2, Artist: Wallace Ejoh, Title: *Ladies night*, Medium: Oil on canvas, Size: 50 x 61cm
Year: 2012, Source: Nothing but the truth exhibition catalogue, 2012**

Wallace Ejoh (b. 1966) who works in diverse themes also presents this depiction that may have been informed by a wedding ceremony.

The dark scene with dull hues of umber, sienna and alizarin crimson is indicative of the poor lighting in the room. The four women are depicted in poses that show them in the process of preparing for a party. He has made his four subjects to fill up his work space for emphasis, thereby highlighting a liberty he suggests ladies rarely have to participate at events such as this. Yet, he has not been able to prove that as it is common for most ladies to exercise their liberty to celebrate such events. Keifer-Boyd (2010) states that, "One way to expose the politics of gender constructions is by examining visual culture for who it addresses by whom and for what purpose-through questioning who is being sold, or persuaded, and what is assumed (p. 2)." The

persuasions intended are not well taught out in some of these paintings which show the need for artists to spend more time interrogating their works at the planning stage.

The dark interior the four women are depicted in somewhat imply that they are making preparations without the consent of their parents or husbands. If the room they are in were bright enough for a viewer to see their faces, perhaps, it would have indicated a positive perception of their intention. For instance, Gill in Peace (2013) holds that "Each light presented in a scene should be intentional and purposeful, enhancing the unique mood and emotion of the scene. Color or light color, is often used to drive the emotion of the scene (p. 16)". In this regard, Ejoh's perception of a ladies' night is covertly inspired and suspicious of being performed under bright lights.

Ebenezer Akinola's (b. 1968) paintings in the last few years have become replete with female figures engaged in productive activities, but for the way in which he depicts them that make them sexy.



Figure 3, Artist: Ebenezer Akinola, Title: *Reflective mood*, Medium: Oil on canvas, Size: 81 x79cm, Year: 2012, Source: Nothing but the truth exhibition catalogue 2012

In the painting titled *Reflective Mood*, he attempts to change the narrative of the woman being wrongly perceived as a thoughtless insensitive person, but the mode of dressing in which she is presented does not ordinarily allow for the message to be read as titled. She looks more like a woman that is about to have a bath and is in the final stage of undressing herself to go to the bathroom. There are various ways and moments in which one can be found in a reflective mood. Therefore, an artist should attempt to interrogate the final depiction through the production of working drawings, and may subject them to a small focus group of none artists to criticise the drawings. This will enable the artist to have diverse views that can aid the final work be devoid of bias.

Joshua Nmesirionye (b. 1969) has instead alluded to a sexist narrative that is commonly held against the female as *femme fatale*. She is depicted to be wearing a skimpy tight-fitting sleeveless blouse with a transparent veil.



Figure 4, Artist: Joshua Nmesirionye, Title: *The Tease*, Medium: Oil on canvas, Size: 110 x 81cm, Year: 2012, Source: Nothing but the truth exhibition catalogue 2012

The narrative in which a woman is in most cultures is more negative when compared to the perception of who a male is. After all, the male prominence informs how perceptions are constructed and allocated. Some examples range from the question of her being a virgin before she gets married, and linked to her ability to bear children or even get pregnant. None of these labeling is used to assess the male before and after he gets married. It is not only the woman who teases, the man also teases the female which leads to pregnancy which the man rejects, and sometimes rape, a shame she bears alone. In the light of this, the depiction is inspired by a phallocentric notion of the woman which is perceived negatively.

Abraham Uyovbisere (b. 1963) among a few other artists has worked extensively on the female image. He depicts a middle-aged woman on her knees with slightly closed eyes and her head tilted upwards. The pose is not of subjugation to a man, but perhaps, to God, as she is depicted in supplication. There is an air of confidence in her resolve to pray over what is depicted in the darkness to the left of the painting.



Figure 5, Artist: Abraham Uyovbisere, Title: *Inner release*, Medium: oil on canvas, Size: 123 x 59cm, Year: 2012, Source: Nothing but the truth exhibition catalogue 2012

Her plain dark blue blouse and wrapper suggest her situation yet; hope might be depicted in the loin cloth round her waist painted in lemon yellow. Her head tie is depicted in cadmium red perhaps, to suggest her resolve to persevere. Again, her situation has not allowed her to wear any jewelry round her neck, wrist or ears. This alludes to the loneliness typical of a widow praying through an inner release to have her problems solved. The artist mostly uses a dark

palette to depict the plight of the woman through which he advances the need to focus on how the problem she is faced with can be alleviated. Uyovbisere has for several years explored the female image from different perspectives with most of them dressed decently. However, the passive pose they are depicted in also makes one wonder what can be so particular about the female image that deserves a negative perception. The fact that the female profile and identity is on the rise, though slowly, presents to artists the need to reveal such improved perceptions. Olumide Oresegun's (b. 1981) painting depicts a girl in a picturesque representation within the ambit of hyperrealism which he is famous for.



**Figure 6, Artist: Olumide Oresegun, Title: *String beans girl*, Medium: oil on canvas
Size: 121 x 90cm, Year: 2012, Source: Nothing but the truth exhibition catalogue 2012**

Oresegun's exploration of the female image has been picturesque and the age bracket in which they are depicted range from about five to sixteen years old. The depictions of the female images show them doing mostly what is typically held as the place of a woman. However, he has a handful of paintings depicting female images reading newspapers, writing and reading books. This diverse depiction that rather presents the female of his choice in a passive and none ambitious identity is equally male-centered. They are presented to sit silently, playing gently with their lips mostly closed as though they do not deserve to be heard. When they are depicted among boys, the female image is depicted as a polite appendage that attempts to please the viewers of both genders.

The theme of the female image presents a poor narrative of what haunts the girl-child, in a country where there is a need to continue to put the female image in the right perspective. The image ordinarily is a construct that is premised on the intention of being able to sell art with the greatest ease possible.

Filani (2012) opines that,

Artistic creativity including art appreciation is a thing of the heart. Aesthetics deal with passion and emotion and its tempo cannot be mathematically measured or quantified. Therefore, the levels and choices of art appreciation differ from person to person. Since art itself is becoming more difficult to define, boxing it into traditional compartments without contextualizing its trajectory might make us atavistic. However, for discerning connoisseurs, the key words to artistic creativity remain skill and good taste (p. 2).

In disagreement with Filani's position, it is worthy to note that every product that exists within the public domain of consumption must be subjected to criticism for it to earn its value. Striping art works of rubrics of assessment has the tendency of it becoming a mere craft albeit his use of the terms 'skill' and 'good taste'. Aesthetic judgement has its rubric set so as to prevent any work from being overrated or underrated. If skill and good taste were to be held out as his overall parameter, Oresegun's painting in figure 6 then will end up setting the tone that contradicts his position of not assessing art through critics.

Sexist images, creativity and boundaries

The path in every creative process requires a variety of inquiries into the theme that the artist intends to portray. It is observed that Nigeria is one of the countries where critics are least welcome in the process of accepting works such that galleries will have an in-house critic.

Kasfir-Littlefield in Saunders (2004) explains that "...the tastes and preferences of a handful of private collectors and curators who work closely with them have had a great influence on the way in which contemporary African art is being defined for its various publics (p. 14)". What they have instead are curators that are in the galleries' payroll. The curator's work is spelt out by the proprietor of the gallery, and once in a while an art historian is invited to write a foreword or an introduction that will appeal to the sensibility of buyers for the sole purpose of selling the paintings on display. This differs from Western practice of gallery-artist relationship. Every artist is expected to create his or her own style as against what obtained during the traditional period where the society guards its style with jealousy. With this, the paucity of the messages that will elicit critical thinking leaves so much to be desired of the works made. Instead, one is left with the question of whether or not the artist understands the need to use these visual idioms to challenge norms and make depictions that will start conversations over various ills of the society. Oguibe in Saunders (2004) avers that "...African artists are either constructed or called upon to construct themselves (p. 14)." In this regard, there is a need for artists to interrogate their works as it enables them to better achieve their desired aim such that the critic becomes a regular feature in visits paid to their studios while they produce their works. The paintings generally present the female image as unintelligent, as none of them is seen to be doing anything devoid of the widely established female stereotype. As sex objects, the paintings by Ejoh in figure 2; nevertheless, the activity the four are depicted to participate in is more selfish than selfless, while Akinola's work in figure 3 and Nmesirionye in figure 4 depict the female image in the sexist imagery. As a victim, Uyovbisere's work in figure 5, Akinola's painting in figure 3 and Nmesirionye's work in figure 4 also make the female a weak person that lacks the capacity to control and protect herself. Oresangun in figure 6, Uyovbisere in figure 5 depict the female image in a stereotypical domestic person who is at the mercy of the man. As a passive person that is either slow to take decisions or waits for the man at all times, Oshinowo's painting in figure 1 also depicts the female image in such perspective. After all, there are women that excel in more than seventy percent of the jobs previously held erroneously as the specific preserve of the male.

Conclusion

Art works such as paintings have and continue to be used as coders and encoders of messages that are subversively depicted for the audience to learn from. Nigerian artists and gallery owners must imbibe the tradition of employing a critic so as to imbue in the works potent meanings that go beyond mere show of chromatic and anatomic display that is reduced to picture making.

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