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Obatala's Children: Marginal Figures in Third Generation Nigerian Fiction

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Abstract

Obatala, the Yoruba creator deity, is credited with the variation in human appearance, hence, is called father to individuals with physical impairments and disabilities. An acceptance of these individuals had been ingrained in the indigenous Yoruba society to the extent that they often featured prominently in pre-colonial literature which was notably in its oral-aural form. Since literature, especially in the African setting, is thoroughly didactic and should mirror every part of society, this study, carried out from the perspective of the Yoruba worldview, attempts to reveal how society has been shaped, albeit unconsciously, to understate people under the category of the marginalized and investigate why and how culturally significant forms which used to constitute the bedrock of Nigerian literature have become subject to critical marginalization with the advent of colonialism in its newly emergent generations.

Keywords: Marginalization, Nigerian Fiction, Obatala, Disability

Introduction

When one hears talk of the marginalized in literature, the mind should go directly to those themes about individuals or groups which, either by commission or omission, are rarely, if at all, treated and then in passing without any particular emphasis placed on them. Included in my definition of the marginalized in this paper are themes focused on individuals with albinism, hunchbacks, disabilities, and, in more general terms, people in society who, for their nature, have become marginalized, that is, a marginalization fostered, to a significant extent, by their lack of representation in the mainstream. This study of the marginalized in literature will be carried out from the perspective of the Yoruba worldview, examining relevant creation myths which explain how these marginal figures came into being.

Obatala and the Yoruba Worldview

The Yoruba, like virtually every other native African tribe, possess a strong sense of belief in a Supreme Being, Olodunmare, "…who is believed to be responsible for creation and maintenance of heaven and earth, of men and women, and who has brought into being divinities and spirits who are believed to be his functionaries in the theocratic world as well as intermediaries between mankind and the self-existent Being" (Awolalu 1979:2). Of these intermediaries, assigned the duty of creation is Obatala, also called Orisa-nla, the Sculptor Divinity. His name Obatala, when literally translated, means King of the White Cloth. Obatala is honoured with brilliant white cloth, white flowers, white beads and cowries, silver coins and jewelry. He is honoured with white hens, snails, white melon soup, pounded yams, and other white foods such as *eko* (Idowu 1962). It is believed that Olodumare commissioned Obatala to mould the first human image. On presenting the first human to Olodumare, he infused it with a soul (*emi*) and the first human being was formed, which is why he is named, "*Ajalaalamo, morimoriti'nmoriomotuntun*" (Ajala the potter who moulds the heads of new-born children). From the Yoruba perspective, there are various versions to the story of Obatala's creation of the variation in human appearances. Some say it is due to Obatala'sunpredictable artistic temperament which is why he creates man however he wants, earning him the epithet, "*A da nib'otiri*" (one who creates as he sees fit). This story claims "…that the albinos (*afin*), the dwarfs (*irara*), the hunchbacks (*asuke*), the cripples (*aro*) and the dumb, (*odi*) are created like that to make them sacred to him…" and not by any fault of theirs. "…Such people are called *Eni Orisa* (those set apart for *orisa*)" (Awolalu 1979:21). This is the reason why, in Yoruba tradition, beauty is not just in the eye of the beholder, it implies something deeper.

To Lawal (2005), the Yoruba conception of beauty comes in two realities: *ewa ode* (external beauty and visual appeal) and *ewainu* (inner beauty). Here, inner beauty is assessed through *Iwa* (character), as implied in proverbs like *Iwal'ewa* (beauty is character). The reason for the emphasis on inner beauty is evident; *ewa ode* (outward beauty) is not bestowed based on a person's worthiness but depends, for the most part, on the whims and caprices of Obatala, the creator deity, hence, "…to over emphasize beauty is tantamount to penalizing the physically unattractive for a fact they could not have personally prevented" (Lawal 2005:165). This is paraphrased simply by Khaled Hosseini's point in his book *And The Mountains Echoed*, in a different but related context, about how "…beauty is an enormous unmerited gift given randomly, stupidly" (Hosseini 2013:330).

Literature in its Yoruba conceptualization goes beyond the mere artistic form to a thoroughly didactic content and should exemplify Pierre Bourdieu's definition of aesthetics as being "…the refusal of what is easy in the sense of simple, and therefore shallow, and 'cheap' because it is easily decoded and culturally [and intellectually] 'undemanding'…" (Bourdieu 1984:486). Literature should essentially, offer a unique portal through which to explore the deeper meanings of identity, morality and being. If this is the case, one cannot help but wonder why so much of the human experience is marginalized and yet so little of it documented.

Marginalization in the Nigerian Novel

Nigerian literature began in particular, not with the written form but, with the oral tradition. Per Gardner (1990), the oral artists, freelancers or guild associates enjoyed reverence as keepers of the people's ancient customs and beliefs. Folklores and tales, stories in form of the "*alo*", praise chants in form of the "*ewi*" in the Yoruba society, incantations to appease gods are merely a few examples of literature existing in a society with rich cultural forms that was Nigeria before colonialism and the import of the Abrahamic faiths.

Both the first and second generation of Nigerian fiction featured themes of marginalization as evident in works like Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and Zaynab Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman.* However, a dominating number of these writers had discourses based largely on politics or, as in the case of the emergent female writers of the second generation, feminism. These, for a long time, overshadowed

discourse on marginalization. As examined in this work, these marginal figures exist, and not in a little number, in society, and one often finds them largely subject to mistreatment, owing to their differences in appearances. These differences, however, should not foster a stigmatization of these marginal figures.

Nigerian third generation writings are not totally devoid of features of marginalization, in fact, there is a sense in which one can argue that much more than the earlier generations of African literature, the novels of the third generation are more boldly addressing issues once looked over. But overtime, there has been a shift in favour of specific problem areas and marginalized groups (Speer, *et al*., 1992), especially subjects like the marginalization of the African hair and gender issues relating to the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transsexual movement, which are definitely trending issues. However, these issues, owing to their frequent subject to discourse in mainstream literature, are gradually sidelining discourse on other issues like disability, for instance.

As has been noted by Fasan (2010), Nigeria has had about three generations of indigenous writers who write to project her culture against the backdrop of an overwhelming Western literary world. This is an attempt to carve out a niche for Nigeria as a country with a history, a rich cultural background with value and belief systems different than the one normally associated with it by the West. It is therefore alarming that with the rate at which literary icons have risen in the Nigerian space, literary works are still scarcely found dealing with themes involving these marginal figures. Worldwide, themes pertaining to individuals with physical impairments are rarely treated in literature, except, perhaps, in children fiction, especially those written in the late 19th and early 20th century like Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (Seymour 2012). A character like the hunchback is one very marginal figure in literature. The most notable literature on this impairment is Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831). Since then, there has hardly been any major work depicting the existence of this Figure in mainstream literature. Even when texts employ these characters, they are, more often than not, portrayed as weird, possessing heightened auras or spirituality, even evil, around them. Seymour (2012) notes how these disabled characters in children fiction often found themselves pigeonholed as villains or 'saintlyinvalids'. Inimah*et al*., (2012:223), in line with Barnes (1992) posits that the link between impairment and all that is socially unacceptable was first established in classical Greek theatre and existing cultural stereotypes perpetuate this linkage with the depiction of the disabled in fictional characterization as evil or sexually degenerate, a threat to the well-being of the non-disabled community.

In Nigerian literature, most especially before its marked generational demarcation, finding themes employing these "Obatala's children" was fairly common in oral literature. However, as aptly put in the introduction to the compilation, *A History of Twentieth Century African Literatures* (1993) edited by OyekanOwomoyela, an important difference between traditional oral art and modern African literature is the identity of their respective practitioners. While the custodians of the traditional oral art was required to be deeply immersed in the traditional mores and history of their community, the modern African writer is a product of sociopolitical structures directly influenced by colonialism and therefore, sprouts works which inevitably reflect their cultural alienation from their communities as well as "…the continuing impact of the colonizing project [and]…its magisterial role in the self-definition of Africans" (*A History of Twentieth Century African Literatures*, 1993:2).

The marginalization of themes concerning Obatala's children in Nigerian fiction stems, arguably, from the drastic change in what used to constitute the bedrock of its literature owing to significant changes evident in culture and society. According Edward Said (1978), colonial legacies still shape dominant perceptions of both colonizer and colonized and the ideas of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures fosters the hegemony of European ideas about not just the orient in this case, but every other Western colonized nation and constitutes what he calls a perpetual "positional superiority" (Said 1978:8) which makes the non-European want to conform to set standards in every way, including literature, as the case seems.

Marginalization in Reality

Marginalization in the words of Burton and Kagan (2003) refers to "…being poor, unemployed, discriminated against or being disabled by a society that won't work around the problems of impairment". More often than not, these "problems of impairment" are natural. This is the reason why these Obatala's children are tagged in popular culture as "freaks of nature". Tags like this imply a stigmatization of these individuals to the extent that they suffer exclusion and marginalization as people's perceptions of their physical differences hampers full inclusion into society. The Convention on the Protection of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities which was adopted and opened for signature at the UN headquarters in New York on the 30th March, 2007, among its objectives recognized that disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal, including environmental barriers (Olayinka and Idowu 2010:6).

In a feature done by Juju Chang and Joseph Diaro (2010) for *Abc News*, one glimpses the brutal reality of the culmination of poverty, prejudice, and superstition-spurred murders behind the epidemic of albino killings in Tanzania. The country has one of the largest population of albinos in the world, as many as 150,000 according to some estimates, and they are being targeted for their white skin. "For decades…" they write, "…people with Albinism have been thought of as ghosts and bad omens. It is also believed that albinos don't die, they just disappear." As if this weren't enough, an idea about albinos being able to bring wealth has cemented and people have been known to weave human hair from albinos into fishing nets for good luck. Countless albinos, including children have been murdered by people who "…hack off arms, legs or genitals…" and sell on the Tanzanian Black Market to feed such ridiculous superstitions. Such inhumane traditions in this 21st century are not few in a continent teeming with them and they drastically influence the treatment of these marginal figures.

Admittedly, it is human nature to be afraid, or at the very least wary, of the unknown or the unusual. It is on this account that individuals like hunchbacks or albinos are often viewed as metaphysical beings. There is a feeling of double consciousness that might be experienced on meeting such individuals. Before the advent of modern science and the explanations behind the reason for albinism, for example, the only explanation possible was the fact that they were people touched by the gods or people punished by the gods for crimes they or their forbears committed, hence, the name "*eniorisa*". In an interview with Baba AwoAwolereAwosanmi, a herbalist in the town of Ibadan, he admits that while the Yoruba creation story ascribes the existence of these individuals to Obatala, sometimes, the gods indeed punished people who might have committed crimes against the gods at one time or the other, or behaved inappropriately. Deliberate disobedience of gods who, for example, have their taboos as drinking palm-wine or eating dog meat would surely bring dire consequences. Such people might give birth to dwarfs or hunchbacks as recompense for their crimes. These individuals were perceived with extra-physical auras, which translated into a system of treatment of such individuals on account of the fact that they were "*abarameji*" (queer individuals). Often, because of this extra-terrestrial quality, these individuals were considered special or otherworldly.

In Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, Kola experiences this feeling of double consciousness when he first meets Ayo Faseyi's cook's daughter, Usaye. He is "attracted and repelled". In the process of painting a picture depicting the pantheon of gods and in a dilemma to decide who to use to represent Obaluwaiye's handmaiden, he suddenly meets this albino girl whose squint and flawless, pale skin lends her an ethereal quality and, in that moment experiences an epiphany of a sort. What other creature to represent Obaluwaiye, the creator deity's daughter than the "gentle and uncertain, frail, disturbing twilight child standing" in front of him.

Lazarus, the self-acclaimed pastor is an albino character in the text. When he intervenes in the potential killing of the shoplifter he later names Abel, "…loud derisive laughter accompanied every abuse, but none actually offered to touch him… were they short of firewood at home? Your mother forgot to bake

you properly…" (p. 118) are merely a few of the insults thrown at him. Sagoe himself confesses that for him "Albinos always had…an unsettling effect, seeming not to share with him a normal physical consistency…" (p. 119). This negates Sekoni's assertion in the text that "…in the dome of the cosmos, there is complete unity of life [and] the plurality of its manifestations is only an illusion" (p. 122). Even "Dehinwa shrank as the albino took the seat next to her…" (p. 159)

Nana Ai in Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman,* an admittedly beautiful and intelligent girl experiences this feeling of differentiation due to "a withered leg [that] told the story of [a] near fatal, crippling disease" (Alkali p. 12), even in her native community where being the granddaughter of an otherworldly man who "scribbled in the dust, a traditional ritual for reading the future" already marks her out as queer. Back at home, she is made to feel inadequate because of a "paralysis in the left leg, the result of polio at the age of six" (p. 11). At the stream, she is leered at by girls, one of which fixates "…her eyes on Nana's left side, an ugly grin at the corner of her mouth" (p. 17). She worries constantly about what is to become of her after her grandfather is no more. "Who was to take care of her, a cripple without relatives?" (p. 18). Among her peers, she is self-conscious because her deformity influences people's attitude towards her. At the secretary's office, the formerly cold and standoffish receptionist only softens towards her after noticing how badly she limped. "This was not the first time, nor would it be the last when the knowledge of her painful deformity had changed the attitude of people towards her. A tide of humiliation swept over her as she lumbered out, conscious of the woman's pitying eyes upon her" (p. 29). She becomes something of a self-imposed recluse, as she thinks, "…few girls would agree to have [her] drag after them" (p.37).

The reality of the unequal treatment she is fated to experience at the hands of people dawns when the old one shouts, "…looking round for an audience. She can hardly walk yet she has an eye for a man. There's nothing like modesty these days" (p.54). He says this despite the fact that Laila, Nana's cousin has been unabashedly chasing the boys since the beginning of the trip. What is worse is the inflection that she should not aspire to liking a boy for the singular reason that she is disabled. Studies have revealed that persons with disability or even in the state of terminal illness remain sexual beings and long to express their sexuality when and where the opportunity does not exist (Motalinagoane-Khau 2006; Oschwald and Powers 2002; Katz 2005 quoted in Olayinka and Idowu 2010:7). In Nigeria, for example, traditionally, sexuality is treated as a reproductive health issue, especially for persons with disabilities. People with disabilities are usually viewed from the notion of survival; thereby they are not considered or involved in sexual matters (Olayinka and Idowu 2010:7). There exists a prevalence of biases and unfounded concerns about people living with disabilities and a lack of economic empowerment deprives the physically challenged person, the woman especially, the ability to negotiate sex which makes them more prone to abuse and keeps them permanently in a disadvantaged position.

Conclusion

Writers of creative and non-creative fiction have an obligation to lend a voice to disadvantaged peoples, that these individuals have the same rights as other individuals and as such, deserve recognition as underprivileged groups. Nana Ai is a mere example of the frustrations of challenged teenagers who, try as they might to be normal, are marked out as different and often become objects of pity. This treatment of differentiation often exerts tensions that could foster a reduction in the individual's self-esteem. In Nana's case, a lifetime of ill-treatment brings about a terrible feeling of self-depreciation so that she would not go out and have fun with the boys or do what other girls her age did, within the bounds of propriety.

Another noteworthy observation in current literary trends is the fact that even when these characters are featured, they are done mostly as flat characters, characters whose roles and stories are hardly ever fully delineated, relatively uncomplicated and do not change throughout the course of the work. They are characters that lack depth and are sparsely developed. It is important to note that characterization, in a nutshell, allows one empathize with the protagonist, and provides the reader of the text a sense of

verisimilitude. The often-shallow characterization of these marginal figures gives very little allowance for the achievement of the reader's verisimilitude and as such, the reader cannot meaningfully empathize with the plight of these individuals, making for very little means through which the truth of the mistreatment of these marginal figures could be brought to the fore and hence, tackled as a much existing reality.

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