

WOMEN AS MEN: IMAGING AND GENDER DYNAMICS IN VINCENT EGBUSON'S *WOMANDELA*

Chika O. OSE-AGBO

&

Joy I. NWIYI

Abstract

This paper examines the imaging of women as “men” and men as women in Vincent Egbuson’s *Womandela*. Against the backdrop of patriarchy, the representations in this narrative project woman in rather dynamic ways. This emerging woman does not strive to out-do the man but takes on social and political postures that attests to her indispensability to the male folk and society. As lofty as these may seem within Nigeria’s patriarchal context, investigating and articulating gender dynamics, the boundaries of male allies, African feminism and what it is not in focus while analysing this image of the African woman in Egbuson’s novel. The study finds that Egbuson’s naming of the woman and re-identification is progressive in its commitment to accepting and articulating the woman’s intellectual and political ability *vis a viz* sociocultural conventions, without necessarily making her unresponsive, anti-man, but accentuating her positive identity and a sense of worth.

Key words: Gender Dynamics, Male feminist, male allies, imaging and *Womandela*

Introduction

The depiction of women in male-authored writings in Africa has been the thrust of many significant discourses and studies. Many of

these studies have implicated these authors, whose privileged positions as early comers to the literary landscape, patriarchal perspective and sensibilities had informed these representations. However, with the subscription of many African women amidst controversies to feminism in its diverse forms, strands and strengths, hitherto consciously and unconsciously; the response to these gender representations and stereotyping seems to remain a continuous discourse. Contributing to this discourse, Mary Ellman queries that if feminism is the spade with which women have dug the grounds of imaginative writing and planted the seed of an authentic female portraiture, why then is it still shrouded in controversies in Africa? Why can't it be wholly acceptable in Africa? (25-54).

Carole Davies avers that feminism as a movement is the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. Thus, it is an "abnegation of male protection and a determination by the female folk to be resourceful and self-reliant" (27). Charles Nnolim observes that feminism as a movement and ideology, urges in simple terms, "the recognition of the claims of women for equal rights and men-legal, political, economic, social, marital et cetera" (253). Feminism is "a way of asking men to prove their worth, it is questioning the exclusiveness of their right and position, it is asking for a breakdown of sexual barriers that inhibit woman, in summary, it is asking for opportunity" (Helen Chukwuma, *The identity* xxvi). Thus, feminist scholarship participates in the larger efforts of feminism "to liberate women from the structures that have marginalised them; and thus, it seeks not only to reinterpret but to change the world in favour of women" (Anthonia Ekpa 28).

At the fore of these agitations have been women and a few men who push for "a rejection of inferiority" and a striving of recognition..." the need for such change, discarding retrogression and oppressive norms and practice against women ...the need for the women to take

their rightful places in the society beside and alongside their men, not behind them groaning in silence” (Chukwuma, *The Identity* xiii-xx).

In this study, we shall look at a redefined African feminism in response to Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo’s call for “a redefinition of the African feminist dialectic” (40) bringing out the strong but salient, unexplored strength of the African women which has not received enough critical attention and the inherent practicability of feminism in the realities of an African society. The feminist consciousness exhibited by African writers -both male and female has led to the questioning of the image of the women in most male authored works. On the contrary, there is the representation of women in female-authored text who are bold, anti-tradition, careless, assertive, daring and even amoral with little or no moral and social values, women as Efurū and Amaka in Nwapa’s works; Debbie in Emecheta’s *Destination Biafra* and Ugo Ushie and Beatrice in Okoye’s *Behind the Clouds* etc. This new woman is a hybrid of African and Western feminism, sometimes a radical and caution less depiction of the liberated woman with little regard for African values. A redefined African feminism looks beyond portraying women as victims:

of man’s superiority, a facile lackluster being, the quiet member of a household, content with bearing children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters, and wife or mother, who takes no part in family decision-making even when such a decision concern her; docility and complete subsummation of will is demanded and exacted from her. (Ekpa 32)

This paper examines the imaging of men as women and women as men in Vincent Egbuson’s *Womandela*. This representation of the African woman in this male-authored narrative is remarkably different. This emerging woman does not strive to out-do the man but takes a social and political position that attests to her indispensability to the

society and humanity at large. As lofty as these may seem within Nigeria's patriarchal context, investigating, articulating gender dynamics and the boundary of African feminism is in focus while analysing this contemporary image of the African woman in Egbuson's novel, *Womandela*.

African Feminism: Theoretical Considerations

African feminism incorporates the African experience and worldview as Carole Davies rightly observes in the assessment of the tenets and goals of genuine and perhaps positive African feminism. Davies points that the following remain imperative considerations when feminism is mentioned in the relation to the African:

The recognition of a common struggle with the African men for the removal of colonial domination. It is not antagonistic to African men but challenging them towards an awareness of women's subjugation. It examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and in effect nullifies those which work against women. It does not simply import Western women's agenda; thus, it respects African woman's status as mother and sees utility in the positive aspects of the extended family and polygyny. It respects the African women's self-reliance and penchant for co-operative work and social organization but rejects the "muledom" that has been the lot of African women, accepts an international women's movement but rejects the European and American modules of feminism. (22)

From Davies' position, a position adopted for this study, the redefined African feminism is not sexist. The line is not drawn along sex-line, rather it is a common struggle championed by both sexes, to make the society a better place. It goes beyond gender warfare; it calls for a change of mentality and attitude. The positive and ideal African

feminism is not anti-African values; rather it seeks to play down or even nullify some African traditions and practices that repress, dehumanise, and rob the woman of her individuality and identity. As Chukwuma rightly observes, “to make headway in the struggle for the emancipation of the African women the truth of the matter is that there is need for discarding retrogressive and oppressive norms and practices against women” (xix).

The genuine African feminism does not advocate a world without men, rather men remain vital part of the woman’s lives. It vehemently rejects Western options of same-sex relationships, lesbianism, contract marriages, or marriages of convenience, violent confrontation, aggression, diabolic and amoral means but instead accommodates African values and traditions. True African feminism respects the dynamism in the status of the African woman as a person first, a woman, wife and then mother. It does not portray the woman as docile, handicapped or careless, one whose only means of protest or assertion is sexual and immoral but paints a balanced and realistic picture of the woman as one who is breaking barriers and the shackles that have held her down, determined, courageous, hardworking, disciplined, able to reason logically and make sound judgement and decisions, and above all useful to herself, her family and the society at large.

The practicable African feminism spotlights the women’s self-reliance and penchant for co-operative work and social organisation (Feminist Consciousness 20). The essence of a positive and authentic African feminism is to make the African woman self-reliant, self-confident, and fulfilled, not necessarily striving with the male. Positive feminism in African recognises education as the only viable option and liberation force that can free and ensure a long-term survival for the woman. As Adimora-Ezeigbo contends, education will bring equal opportunity for both sexes and freedom of choice for the woman, even in matters of selecting marriage partners and the type of job to do

(Woman Empowerment 10). Also, Zainab Akali speaking on the role education plays in the life of the woman in her pursuit of independence asserts that, her education is expected to transform her into discerning and highly selective person, able to successfully integrate and synthesise the principles that govern her life as a human being and those positive aspects of the Western and, African culture that can help nurture and strengthen her personality (18).

The re-defined African feminism needs to bring balance and reality to the picture of the African woman as super woman painted by the early female authors, in reaction to female portraiture by men. The Efurus, the Amakas, the Eblas, the Debbies, the Beatrices, the Aissatous, etc. who in a bid to escape the physical, emotional and mental humiliation meted out to them by men use any means available to them usually resorting to rebellion, violent confrontation even unconventional means to assert their individuality and independence, thereby distorting the image of the African woman. The re-defined African feminism is not necessarily radical, but it brings into life through creative imagination women whose strength lie in their acceptance and appreciation of their complimentary not supplementary or subordinate role to man. Thus, re-defined African feminism demands a reconstruction of societal institution and a redefinition of cultural image and role of women and men, if women are to be autonomous persons and achieve economic and political quality (Offor 18).

However, it is enlivening and futuristic to give the woman a pride of place in the African society. So, instead of bemoaning years of denigration, the African writer launches into writing texts in which women are determined, privileged, assertive and disciplined. One may begin to wonder then, how women can achieve recognition and significant emancipation for the woman by such representation. This is because as Nwachukwu-Agbada asserts, literature refines the whole man, sharpens our aesthetic sensibility, and cultivates certain inner controls

in our behaviour which prepares a citizen to become governable without necessarily being slavish or subduable (31). This is the crux of the matter, this relationship between futurism and the feminist struggle. The picture of the fulfilled woman in African literature will help cultivate in both male and female psyches a deep understanding and need for freedom and liberty. The redefined feminism is genuinely interested in the whole woman who is psychologically, morally, socially, and economically sound; it advocates a society in which privileges and even rights are not based on gender but on ability and merit, a society in which men and women respect and adore each other. The redefined African feminism is the answer to the much-desired female recognition, for it will not only ensure the creation of a real and fulfilled African woman in African literature but will also make the African society a better place to live. The redefined African feminism is home-bred positivistic, accommodating, progressive and dynamic. This slant of feminism for the purpose of this study is what we call the positive African feminism.

For the feminist struggle in Africa to yield desired result, gender roles and societal expectation must be revisited from a positive perspective; this is because the notion of gender roles as assigned based on patriarchy social construct may serve to reinforce inequalities. This stereotyped attitude towards gender roles played by both men and women has sustained the discrimination against woman wherever she finds herself. From girlhood to womanhood the African woman has had to contend with many issues dictated by culture, marriage, childlessness, old age, stereotyping among other tenets of the African culture that militates against her “being” as she journeys through life’s winding cycles. The feminine standpoint in matters of concern has not been sufficiently considered worthwhile with available literature and studies on the discussion of these realities have been authored predominantly by female writers and critics for obvious reasons and commitments.

African Men and Feminism

From what has been said so far, gender discourse and reality in Africa seems to crave even more dynamic attention. It is in this direction that this paper focuses the engagement of men in feminist discourse and the dynamic possibilities that these entails for the agitation for gender equality. Robert Jensen proposes that men need to take feminism seriously, firstly, for personal reasons where the patriarchal construction of masculinity and the socialisation process is implicated; and for reasons bothering on justice. He states that:

Feminism can help us answer many of our questions, ease our pain, heal our wounds, and allow us to be decent people because it is not just about concern for "women's issues" and it is not just a theory of gender relations; feminism also is an explanation and critique of the domination/subordination dynamic that structures power relations in this society. Feminism provides an approach to society that allows women and men to better understand the world in which they live and to apply insights about gender to other struggles in life, both in the private and public spheres (beginning with the realization that the private/public dichotomy is problematic). (116)

Thus, worthy of note is the growing number of men agitating for equality between men and women. Sandra Barky states that while "the relationship men have with feminism is always perceived to be antagonistic, a position that consistently presents men in opposition to the movement and its ideology; interestingly, this reality it would seem is consistently decreasing with men's involvement and participation in feminism". However, Barky avers that "with this posture comes varied responses that are sometimes rather opposing, conflicting and critical of men who undertake feminist projects" (1).

Nevertheless, men's involvement in the agitation for equality between men and women have introduced new dynamics in perception

and nomenclature. Thus, actively participating in deconstructing or critiquing patriarchal constructs of masculinity, while advocating for gender equality has earned men names such as gender activist, egalitarian, male feminist, pro-feminist amongst others. Cory Aragon insists that while “it may seem beneficial to the feminist thought to have men engaged and involved in feminism, male Feminists find themselves in the weird position of opposing entrenched patriarchal gender hierarchies while effectively reinforcing them in a seemingly oppositional relationship between the culturally masculine, the culturally male, and the positive theory of Feminist thought” (1).

In fact, Paul Kleynjan argues that “attracting men to feminism is such a difficult task” (6). While these perceived contradictions exist in this engagement and men attempt to understand and support the significance of women’s agitation for equality, Aragon suggests that “feminism will be more acceptable to men if advocated by men” (3). Perhaps we must come to terms with this altogether significant reality that “men’s choices to identify as feminists involve a continual negotiation of male privilege and power and that some men’s identification with feminism connects to their intersectional understanding of their own complex social positioning” (Kleynjan 3). More complex it would seem when Africa’s recognition and ideological formation around patriarchy is considered. Thus, most African men would not describe themselves as feminist nor give anyone the privileged to do so easily because of their action, and engagements with agitating for women’s rights.

However, Kleynjan speaks about the possibilities associated with becoming a good male feminist. He points that a male feminist usually develops respectful and healthy women-centered relationships with women and with other men. In these healthy relationships, the male feminist becomes attuned to the otherness of the Other, a position non-feminist men find difficult to comprehend as this weird feminist embarks on this journey towards equality. (44-45). Men in African

literature, who actively engaged in re-imaging women in their narratives have readily and easily been described as male feminists and feminist allies or pro-feminist without necessarily taking into consideration their acceptance or otherwise of these nomenclatures against the backdrop of overt patriarchal structures that their narratives seem out to fictionally deconstruct and dismantle. These writers have become attuned with the otherness of women in society and device creative means to recover these realities and perhaps establish what Larry May describes as a Progressive Male Standpoint (18). It is within this context that this study investigates Vincent Egbuson's novel, *Womandela*.

Women as Men: Women's Imaging in Vincent Egbuson's *Womandela*

Vincent Egbuson's *Womandela* tells the story of Woma, a member of Baraka's church and presidential aspirant of the Numah Party. The narrative projects her aspirations, faith, relationship, and eventual rise to power. Her story starts with Pastor Baraka's revelation of the vision he had of Woma as president, an action that he later referred to as "A still birth in my hands" (10). At one of her campaigns at Rainbow Square, Egbuson craftily midwifes the birth and christening of his female man. While Woma is expressing her appreciation to her absent husband, Dela. Egbuson tells us that:

the crowd took up the chant Womandela! Womandela! Womandela!... She [Womandela] thanked the people for her new name: she would henceforth be known, called and thought of as Womandela, the offspring of no one but a principle and a people, man and woman who had in unison given her the name. both male and female, the fusion of man and woman. (16).

Aware of the importance and significance of the name and naming in African society, Egbuson gives his protagonist a very symbolic name- a combination of Woma- 'a genderless name' and Dela which means 'the power of man and woman thus her new image and name becomes wholly acceptable to all as the power of all Numah men and women taking form in one woman: an affirmation of faith in ourselves (17). Egbuson's re-naming and re-imagining of his protagonist and heroine marks the dynamic reassignment of roles which pays off as the people are not averse to being led by a woman but recognise her leadership capacity and express willingness to be led by Womadela. On the other hand, as the narrative unfolds, Egbuson projects another female character, assigning her a role that seems to be readily associated with men. This is deliberately done to shed light on police/military brutality and examine man's inhumanity to man irrespective of gender and sex. She becomes the face of brutality and oppression, an unacceptable character as the narrator tells us:

An old man was slow at obeying. A female soldier slapped him on the back and tried to push him down. He faced her, speechless, then shook his head. A young male soldier apologized to the grey-bearded man and tried to persuade his female colleague to let him go away. She refused insisting on obedience and equal treatment for all offenders. Trembling, the old man begged her: 'my pickin, I beg you, you don already beat me. No tell me to sit on pottor- pottor. Na beg I dey beg you: Think of my age. Seventy year. This my white hair don see life oh. (Egbuson 20)

The female soldier, despite appeals from her colleagues, onlookers and the old man, remains adamant and insists on humiliating the man by insisting that he sits down on the wet muddy ground. The old man sat on the mud, after all she was the ranking officer. The new African

woman is assertive yet traditional and reasonable. The character of the female soldier contrasts Woma's as such, it was not a mere coincidence that she is fated to meet a tragic end. Her image, like that of other undesirable and unacceptable characters in the text is one that needs not be allowed to fester. The narrator continues: "his attention is now on the fair-skinned female soldier who had returned. She sat where her victims had sat a moment ago, put the muzzle of her gun in her mouth and exploded the gun" (Egbuson 21).

Egbuson's protagonist in *Womandela* is presented as self-defining, assertive and proactive both in her personal and social life. Woma is not constrained by social expectation even in her relationships, unlike the traditional woman, she does not wait to be courted. She is bold enough to approach and court a man if she is interested in him. Egbuson creates Woma in the image of the man, of a hunter, a typical male role. She stalls and hunts rather than being hunted. This role is evident in her relationship with both Dela and Muthezi. As Egbuson captures the encounter between Woma and Abenego Dela thus: "...Dela, how are you going to say sorry to me? I, a woman, had to chase you the man. How can you let a woman do your job for you? Please tell me how to say sorry, he pleaded, on his knees, his arm around her legs, she told him how to say sorry and he obeyed her". (Egbuson 123)

Still on Dela's un-masculine and feminine image and gender role dynamics, Egbuson through the voice of Yebu, Woma's mother presents Dela, Woma's husband as kind, intelligent and very shy. she tells her sister, Adama.

Their happiness seemed to have been sent to them from heaven. But even in those early days, she felt it was not proper, the way Dela had given Woma the headship of the family. For everything he needed approval from her and if she wasn't happy with him, he wouldn't eat. Too much goodness,

otherwise he was a perfect husband except for his shyness. Dela was too shy and he suffered pitifully if he was alone with her without Woma. (34)

Even Woma reminisces on Dela's personality and how he cares for her when she is sick,

...if his care and concern for her cloyed and she snapped at him, he would turn wretched, the tears welling up in his eyes, she would relent and pull him to herself. Are you a small boy? She would scold him mock-passionately. What's wrong with you? I am sorry Woma, don't be angry with me. But Woma your body is burning! Please take the tablet please. (203)

Egbuson's image of Womandela is not one of the love-struck and lonely maidens, she is intentional even in her relationships, she is family centered, flexible, nurturing, desires positive male companionship, responsive and more importantly responsible. Although she refuses to see Pastor Baraka after the seeming failed prophesy of her presidency, she worries for his safety after hearing that Pastor Baraka has not returned to Inago. As a result of Dela's shyness and his non-traditional and feminine representation, he complimented Woma, he never advised her against her principles, but he only advocated the path of love" and when he could no longer stand Woma's limelight and aspiration, he left her but ensured that Woma is well taken care of as his wealth had protected her from pecuniary temptations up until this moment (Egbuson 127). Even after he has left Woma, Dela fails to wholly detach himself from her, he decides to take her name and bears Dela Woma in Agra. This act is symbolic in Egbuson's imaging and gender reconstruction. The man taking his wife's name instead, this act is symbolic of gender role and power switch.

Another symbolic though comic representation of gender reimagining, an overt representation of men as women in *Womandela* is seen in one of Latifa Art's cartoons. In that particular cartoon Latifa dresses all Womandela's ministers in skirts and blouses and Womandela in denim trousers and a denim jacket (Egbuson 129). This is Egbuson's idea for social and gender role balance where each individual's role is dictated by their capacity. Woma, a woman is a born leader, fearless, resolute, kind and at the same time reasonable. Both Dela and Muthezi and other male (and female) members of her cabinet did not feel unmanned or in competition with her, rather they depend on her for different reasons, look up to her and support her to succeed.

Gender dynamics continues to play out in Muthezi's relationships and marriage. Through his relationships, Egbuson creates women other than Woma, who had power not only over their bodies and life but over their relationship with men too as seen in Muthezi's lover, Muniya who prefers the freedom of prostitution to marriage. Although Muthezi too had loved Woma, he could not bring himself to express his feelings to her but secretly licks his wound after Woma asks Dela out. Even after Dela left Woma and Muniya left him, he still could not woo Woma. Woma herself makes the move after she sees him "Muthezi was sitting opposite her in her office, a devastated man, looking like a man who had run home from a pub at the end of 7.3 magnitude earthquake and found that he had nothing left except the cloth he was wearing" (Egbuson 200). Muthezi's and Dela's image above is Egbuson's subtle way of 'ungendering roles' in love, courtship, marriage and heartbreak; after all men too have hearts.

In *Womandela*, Egbuson creates images of strong, bold and assertive women who are politically aware, ambitious and who are willing to pursue their dreams side by side their male counterpart. These women formed a strong bond of sisterhood, looking out for each other. Dr. (Mrs.) Imasat Keegan-Anthony, the self-appointed leader of the

female members of the party mobilises other women to support Womandela. The women are not timid, nor begging for crumb rather they are strategic thinkers, politicians with the will power to stand for what is right. Imasat tells Womandela: "...Two, after the inauguration you are the president of Numah, and the administration is yours not Chief Ngura's. He is the chairman of the party; you are the President of Numah" (Egbuson 92). With this level of awareness and support base, it was impossible for Chief Ngura to play his god father and king maker role during Womandela's presidency. After Yamara loses Affra, her cheating husband, the women stand by her in her grief, and ensure that Yamara becomes their party flag bearer and subsequently wins the election.

In the novel, unlike her predecessors, Womandela invests in human and social infrastructure, built schools, skill acquisition housing, bridges, gave scholarships, and consulted with the refugee. Womandela refuses to support her party's political investment policy- a woman having the needed political will to stamp out corruption starting from her party unlike her Nigerian counterpart, a man. "Womandela is a female African Model for the human race" (Egbuson 143). Following Womandela's popularity and her populist stance, her party men especially Chief Ngura is displeased with her and sorts for ways to discredit her however like the legendary Mandela, Womandela, bore the criticism of Chief Ngura stoically. Thus, Womandela's presidency, a female is devoid of controversies and scandals, something that is almost unusual.

Woma's character unlike the male politicians play politics of fairness, devoid of bitterness. Woma, unlike her male predecessor and successor allow press freedom and tolerates opposition. The author uses the character of Chief Ngura to depict the average Nigerian male politician whose only creed is money and power, While Womandela is planning to help him after his fall, he seizes every opportunity to oppose and work against her and her government. He goes ahead to engage the

services of Mike a dangerous man, a sniper, and a killer to pluck Womandela out because according to him, she has refused to “spread it for everybody”. When his deal with Mike fails, he resorts to God’s power, the bomb maker, to kill Womandela even if it means sacrificing few others. Chief Ngura’s attempt at killing Womandela at the convocation fails too, only this time his heart and life also fails him. “When the policemen who had come to arrest him took him to hospital, he was declared dead” (Egbuson 272). Both Chief Ngura and Affra’s image, like the military woman, must meet death. Egbuson does not allow these negative images to thrive well nor even survive, they are undesirable and unacceptable and should not be emulated.

Conclusion

Vincent Egbuson’s *Womandela* presents a nuanced portrayal of gender dynamics within the framework of a patriarchal Nigerian society. The novel’s depiction of women as dynamic and indispensable participants in social and political spheres challenges traditional gender roles without opposing men or traditional values. This study demonstrates that Egbuson functions as a male ally with feminist inclinations with his narrative, offering a progressive vision of African women and feminism, emphasising intellectual and political development for women while maintaining harmony with existing socio-cultural norms. Through the naming, re-identification, and positive portrayal of women, *Womandela* contributes to the evolving discourse on gender, affirming the significance of positive gender roles, identities, and possibilities in contemporary African literature. Egbuson’s novel, thus serves as a crucial literary effort in re-defining the boundaries of African feminism and male participation, providing a model for a balanced and inclusive approach to gender equality.

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