

Poetics of Advocacy: Womanhood and Feminist Identity in Patricia Jabbeh Wesley's *Where the Road Turns*

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ABSTRACT

The crux of feminist ideological alignments is the struggle for the woman's liberation from patriarchal subjectivities. This study investigates the utilization of poetry by Patricia Jabbeh Wesley to challenge patriarchal dominance and expose the gimmicks of female devaluation by hegemonic imperialism. Wesley's poems: "Inequality in Hell" and "My Auntie's Woman-Lappa Husband" which sufficiently explore feminist consciousness from Wesley's poetry collection, Where the Road Turns, were purposively selected and subjected to close reading and qualitative analysis. The poems were critically analyzed through the lens of postcolonial feminist literary criticism which examines issues of phallogocentric structures, especially in formerly colonized states. The selected poems show the itchy pains of masculinity and devaluation of womanhood in canonical text. Wesley's poetry invites her readers to a philosophical introspection of patriarchal order with respect to the unbalanced treatment of women in postcolonial Liberia. The poet, through her art, exposes the unfair imaging of women globally.

Keywords: Patricia Jabbeh Wesley, Patriarchal dominance, Masculinity, Feminist consciousness, Womanhood

INTRODUCTION

It is worth knowing that while the genre of prose particularly is well represented by the female writers, there is paucity of female voices in the genre of poetry. Those who, however, venture into poetry writing are rather in the lighter weight division unlike their counterparts in the prose fiction. However, one can argue that the like of Maria Ajima, Lola Shoneyin, Mabel Ewewierhoma, Patricia Jabbeh Wesley, Jumoka Verisimo, Ogochukwu Promise and such others are good representatives of the female poets from the African continent.

In Liberia, Patricia Jabbeh Wesley is a household name in the genre of poetry with several awards to her credit. Wesley has consistently stuck to poetry like her male counterparts - Niyi

Osundare, Odia Ofeimum, Remi Raji, Syl Cheney Coker, and Hallowell Gbanabom in both Nigeria and Sierra Leone respectively. While the male poets write from the male perspectives, the female poets reflect their worldview in their poetry. Female writers express the peculiarity of being a woman in their art (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1987: 5). These writers, in addition, deploy their art as strategies of rewriting the negative perceptions and stereotypes against the woman. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie shares the view that African poetry particularly in the hands of the male writers portray the woman with limited roles which place woman on the margin of relevance vis a vis their male counterparts. She argues that:

many male writers conceive of woman only as phallic receptacle. This writer (Ogundipe-Leslie) once had to do a radio program on the image of women in Africa through poetry. Searching through the anthology Poem of *Black Africa*, She (Ogundipe Lelie) found only the image of woman as lover; a great deal of the poetry was about the love of women, not love in its larger sense but sexual, physical love. There was little about the deeper aspects of love such as loyalty, care, kindness or nurturing. The woman was mainly conceived of as “mother” or “erotic lover”. The “mother” stereotype leads to the limiting of a woman’s potential in society (5).

What is deducible above is that women writers as activists are conscious of the quiescent positioning of the woman by masculine in the imaginative art, and are therefore deploying their art, as the women’s advocate, to expose the strictures which limit the female potentials beyond domesticity.

Feminist Consciousness and the Female Art

The core of every feminist imaginative art is to rewrite the interiorization of women. To Mabel Ewrierhoma (2002), redressing the textual devaluation of the woman is one of the priorities of female creativity. Such “redressing” tilt toward projecting both the intrinsic and extrinsic values of the woman in the society, Therefore, female creative writers protest measuring of women against the unbalanced standard set by the masculine order. The cultural position of women as well as the textual characterization of women which places women at the margin of relevance is at the core of feminist interrogation. Add to this, the female writers seek to reposition the woman against unbalanced histories which are often male-centred. Patricia Jabbeh Wesley in an essay: “Nobel Women’s Initiative Delegation to Liberia and the 20th African Union Summit, Ethiopia 2013” alluded to this when she stated that the history of women during war times is often skewed in favour of men, neglecting some of the heroic deeds of women; the psychological and physical humiliation women suffer during conflicts. According to her, the male narrative fails to explicate “the story of women raped and killed

looking for food I want to tell that story”. Thus, as a poet cum women’s advocate, it can be understood from her opinion that she deploys her poetry, as an activist writer, to narrate the women’s experience. To Wesley, therefore, the female writer has the burden of writing the woman’s history from a more realistic perspective. This aligns with Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo (1986), who believes that female writers inherently are bound to expose the ills of the hegemonic tragedy of positioning the woman’s history. Aidoo (1986), further admonishes that beyond protesting the biases against women in female-centred art, the female writer should as well use their art to celebrate women’s “physical and intellectual capabilities” (16).

The phallic ink, over the centuries, has promoted sexist ideologies. This is exemplified in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35: “let your woman keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak, but they are commanded to be under obedience as saith the law. And if they will learn anything, *let them ask their husbands at home for it is as shame for women to speak in the church*”. Holy Bible (KJV) (emphasis mine).

The point above is that for a very long time, women’s voices and leadership particularly in liturgical worship is muted. The sensibility and the relevance of their voice, however, depends on “their husbands at home” since it is unacceptable for them to stand in the pulpit to proclaim the gospel. This is also in addition to the woman being negatively portrayed as the source of man’s doom in the book of Genesis as many attributes God’s curse on Adam to Eve. It is against this backdrop that gynocritics attempt to reconstruct and deconstruct the one-sided narratives which limit the potentialities of the women in society.

In contemporary times, feminists and the empowerment of women help advocate and promote women as critical agents of societal growth and development. Even in Christendom and other religious practices, many women now take up leading roles in churches’ sermons and propagation of the gospel. In traditional African societies, which are largely governed by the dictates of patriarchy, cultural and institutional configurations favour the masculine identity; cultural practices from marriage, inheritance, religion, and political leadership flit toward the men’s advantage. In Esan traditional culture in the southern part of Nigeria, it is taboo for a woman to commit adultery. The dire consequences of such activities include death for both the woman and her children. This culture, however, appears silent on who befalls the man who allegedly committed adultery with the woman. This reincarnates the biblical account of the encounter between the adulterous woman on the one hand and Jesus on the other hand. While the Pharisees’ angst and punishments are directed at the woman, the man whom the act was committed with was out of the narrative. Thus, women are subjected to both physical and psychological harm based on the conditional ties prescribed by the men. This is further illustrated by Foluso Orebiyi (2002) that:

... a variety of norms and beliefs are particularly powerful in perpetuation of violence against women. These include a belief that men are inherently superior to women, that men have a right to "correct" female behavior that hitting is an appropriate way to discipline women, that a man's honor is linked to a woman's sexual behavior (108).

Orediyi's position above is in affirmative of the privations and socio-cultural imbalances against womanhood. In most traditional African settings, the women's socio-cultural existence is defined by the men. As oftentimes, their respect and acceptability are tied to the man. It is arguable, therefore, that perhaps; the adulterous women would have lost her life to public humiliation by stoning if Jesus was a woman whom society has less regard for.

Rewriting, deconstructing and reconstructing the woman's values against uncouth biases and poor imaging of women are some of the core interests of feminism and feminist writers. Feminism seeks to expose institutional mechanisms against women in society. Hence, challenging unhealthy cultural and religious practices strewn against women, contesting oppressive tendencies, inequalities and poor perception of women has been the major agenda of feminists across regions. Notable feminist pioneers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Olive Schreiner, Helen Cixous, Doris Lessing, and John Stuart among others helped lay the foundation of feminist consciousness in art. Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory*(1995) states that such classical books like Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Schreiner's *Women and Labors* and Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* written in 1792, 1911 and 1929 respectively "had diagnosed the problem of women's inequality on society and (in some cases) proposed solutions" (120). These classical texts, however, helped revive the consciousness of women activists as writers in 1960. They further challenged the uncouth objectification of women in society. This eventually culminated to what is today known as the feminist literary criticism.

Postcolonial feminism focuses on examining women's experience in former colonies as well as their experiences in the western environment. The feminist critics seek to unravel the misrepresentation and sexist stricture which devalues women in Africa and other western or American former colonies. The missing gap in western feminism has always been the failure to take into consideration the socio-historical and cultural context of the African women who suffer a double-edged pair of western oppression on the one hand, and objectification by most African patriarchal settings on the other. As Ritu Tyagi (2014), writes:

Postcolonial feminist theory has always concerned itself with the relationship between white feminist and her indigenous counterpart. In their eagerness to voice the concern of the colonized women, white feminists have overlooked racial, cultural and historical specificities that mark the condition of these women (46).

It presupposes from Tyagi's point of view that postcolonial feminism and other Afrocentric model of feminism are primarily concerned with the "racial, cultural and historical" peculiarities that characterize the socio-cultural conditions of African women.

Similarly, postcolonial feminism is also concerned with rewriting and challenging the devaluation and negative imaging of women in both colonial and postcolonial texts. Postcolonial feminist critics, therefore, interrogate negative assumptions written about women in phallic canonized literature (Antonia Navaro Tajero, 2013). For centuries, due to the privileged dominance of male writers, women were portrayed in a biased position in literature produced by men. Ankita Shukla (2016) attests that "until recently, most of the published writers were men and the portrayal of women in literature was without a doubt biased. Hence, postcolonial feminist writer or critic is concerned with exposing and deconstructing the negativities and biased representations of women in either colonial or postcolonial literature. However, Bamarani (2014) is of the view that women's portrayal, especially in American literature, is based on the writer's personal experience or as a result of the prevalent societal stereotypes and women's position. Though Bamarani argues that women are portrayed as mother earth goddess angels, mothers, saints and such other positive attributes, they are nonetheless, remain to many, as embodiments of temptations. He argues further that "the depiction of women in literature was inevitably not balanced" (45). Sunda and Yen-Me (2005), David Mikailu (2011) describes postcolonial feminism as third-world feminists who also contest the simple deprecating of everything that is non-western; they also challenge power relations.

Advocacy and Liberia's Feminist Struggle

Mapping feminist struggles and empowerment for women in Liberia share similar terrain of dismantling age-long hegemonic strains which limit women's visibility and inclusion in most patriarchal settings of Africa. Liberia is a country with unique history and identity. This uniqueness reflects in her formation as the first independent nation in West Africa and the concomitant social-political conflicts which eventually led to the infamous fourteen years of civil wars in Liberia. These peculiarities which shaped the realities and history of the nation expectedly have a negative impact on the women of Liberia. This consequently defines the feminist struggle and quest to unbar sexist strictures which limit women's aspirations. The protracted war experiences in Liberia undoubtedly were masterminded by the masculine power struggle. The wars consequently had teething effects, particularly on women and children. According to the Nobel Women's Initiative Delegation to Liberia and 20th African Union Summit (2013):

Taylor's government forces as well as the rebel faction recruited child soldiers into their armies as young as six or seven. Women were subjected to widespread

gender based violence and rape was used as a weapon for war to terrorize communities, to force people to flee their homes and to break up social structure... *77 percent of women were raped during the conflict* (emphasis, mine).

The foregoing depicts a traumatic and psychic mortification of women in what Morgan Lea Euban (2013) describes as the “most brutal civil conflict” on women. Notwithstanding, Liberian women and feminist interests are formidable forces challenging the subjugation of women and restoration of peace in Liberia. Korto Reeves Williams (2017) argues that there is a systematic marginalization and discrimination against women and girls in Liberia. This is hinged on Liberia as a largely patriarchal society where women and girls occupy the fringe space and are considered less important in decision-making and implementation; often time, the men take the lead on issues affecting both genders. Williams herself was a victim of the war who saw how young girls and women generally were treated as objects of sex slaves. Against this background, she, alongside other women in Liberia became a leading force as feminist challenging the uncouth treatment and devaluation of women in Liberia.

As a feminist activist in Liberia, William became the Country Director of Action Aid in Liberia. In addition, her involvement with the Liberian and African feminists for further activated her feminist agenda resulting in women empowerment and challenging institutional frameworks and obstacles against women’s aspirations. This involves deconstructing and stimulating women’s rights, and economic and political discourse aimed at repositioning women in Liberia. As an unapologetic feminist, William (2008) posits that denying women’s choice of decision making and rights by institutional mechanism portends danger to sustainable development. According to her, the indices on national development show that women occupy “a lower rank in all areas such as health, education, labour and so forth”. Children and women being the greatest victims of the Liberia civil war led women activists to lead peace movement in halting the war.

Advocacy and Redefining the Female Identity in Wesley’s Poetics

Advocating, reconstructing and deconstructing the female identity against the backlash of negative stereotypes against women are major discourse in women’s writing. Wesley, aware of the male-centric representation of women as devilish in some classical literature especially with such characters like Eve, Medusa, and Salome as female fatale proto-type (Barbara, 2016), set out to deconstruct the female identity often in the words of Barbara (2016) as wrongly perceived as “beautiful but deconstructive erotic, demonic and dangerous” (1). Hence, they are condemned as ‘woe unto men” (women) and Evil (Eve) and as such belong to the fiery heat of hell fire. Wesley’s, *Where the Road Turns*, besides the thematic concern of war,

also embarked on a literary mission of rewriting and interrogating the ingrained assumptions of women as devil already promoted by the phallic ink.

In the poem “Inequality in Hell”, Wesley demonstrates her commitment as the woman’s activist cum advocate. Amidst humor, parody and satire, she draws her reader to rethink the stereotypical perception of women as the most candidates of hell especially in Liberia and Africa generally. Rather, to her:

In Hell, there’s a disproportionate ratio of Liberian men to women, of African men to women, a disproportionate

ration of any men to women: men everywhere,
you find yourself bumping into a man in strange places.

In a corner, a group of men gather in fiery heat,
recalling tattle-tale wives, wives who cooked with too much

salt, who wore their shoe heels too high, wives who
lavished hard embezzled money on themselves. Wives

who just had to drive a new Pajero or Mercedes-Benz
Or Cadillac, wives who cooked rice so soft it became glue.

“Where are the wives now? A man asked pushing away
burning chunks from his face. In heaven, the women laugh

themselves to death over the gossip of men. A few women
gather around Jesus for a song (*Where the Road Turns*, 107).

It can be inferred above that Wesley’s feminist agenda tilted toward repositioning the Liberian women and redefining their identity as virtuous and god-fearing whose godly dispositions place her in a vantage position to heaven when compared with their male counterparts. Wesley’s allusion to “Liberian and African men”, is symbolic. It suggests the African patriarchal society where women scuffle against chauvinistic strains. Wesley’s poetry satirically plays upon such negative assumptions of women as wasteful and absent-minded as suggested in “wives who cooked with too much salt and lavished hard embezzled money on themselves”. Wesley here satirizes a society which neglects women’s economic and social relevance, particularly in the family where men are seen as heads not minding the role and social-economic partnership women play. Add to this, women in many instances act as homemakers or breadwinners of several families in Africa. Eboiyehi, Moghalu and Bankole (2016) after all affirm that in Nigeria for instance, many households in addition now have women as breadwinners.

Wesley's poetry stirs the age-long patriarchal dominance over women in Liberia, especially where women are often confined to domestic roles such as cooking. Wesley in "Inequality in Hell", further paints a tale of men's ingratitude and humiliation of women who after preparing the family's meal are neither appreciated nor encouraged. Instead, the men often squint at them with the accusation of being bad cooks. This is exemplified further in "wives who cooked rice so soft it became glue" (107).

Wesley alludes to Flora Nwapa's conversation with James (1990) that the home remains the first destination of women's oppression as the boy child is often treated fairly well and with much freedom compared with the girl child who is often groomed for more domestic roles. Hence, boys whose negligence leads to adding too much pepper or salt are pardoned while the girl child is subjected to verbal abuse for failing to pass the test of a future wife or mother. Wesley's poetry and feminist activism is a double-edged sword which aims at stirring the uncouth treatment of women on the one hand and satirizing the negative assumptions of women on the other hand. Wesley does this by ridiculing society's poor imaging of women as loquacious, who go about gossiping about others. Wesley's artistic commitment as the women's advocate is seen in how she subverts the poor perception of women as garrulous by shaking and turning the table around the men. Add to this, she lampoons masculinist dispositions which degrade women. The poem, "Inequality in Hell" confronts such representations of women as gossipers. Hence, the poet subverts that notion by depicting the men as rather petty and quidnunctious; those are the men who go about ridiculing their wives before other men in the public and, therefore, will languish in hell while "the women laugh" (line 11-12), and are busy in heaven with lord Jesus with no time for slight talks like the men:

"Where are the wives now?" a man asks, pushing away
Burning chunks from his face. In Heaven, the women
gather around Jesus for a song. There's been no time (*Where the Road
Turns*, 107).

It is worth knowing that Wesley's feminist standpoint does not gloss over women who shirk their responsibilities as mothers. Such women abandon the motherly role in search of the artificialities of beauty. Wesley's poetry condemns women who "find themselves in search of malls and boutiques for the latest pair of shoes" (107) leaving their children's health conditions at a greater risk resulting in death from diseases like "measles", and malaria", and "Yellow fever". Indirectly, the poet's feminist strand is a call to all women not to neglect their role as good mothers whose children's priority and care should not be abandoned. This is one of the core tenets of African womanism, especially of Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's brand, which in the words of Nyasha Junior (2015), is "less individualistic and more familial". To Wesley, women who on the basis of individual pride and in search of the "latest pair of shoes" in

“malls and boutiques” (line 20) which leads to the suffering and death of their children, they too like the men, will miss their way to heaven. This is suggested in lines 1-5:

In heaven, there's disproportionate ratio of children
to mothers, nappy-haired children whose mothers never
bothered to comb their hair until they were dead of measles
malaria, yellow fever. The women find themselves in search
of malls and boutique for the latest pair of shoes.

up and down in the hot March sun a group pf women chatter
about what would have happened had they not died young.

one of them misses the way, the green door with the huge
knob, the knob you turn to see Jesus, where a lion

stands by the door (*Where the Road Turns*, 107)

Wesley's feminist voice and confrontations against patriarchal weight are exemplified again in the poem “My Auntie's Woman- *Lappa* Husband”. The beauty of poetry and the iconic representation of a long stretch of stories in a few lines are portrayed in the poem. In this poem “woman lappa” speaks to stories of married men with “side-chicks”; it is a metaphor for coquettish men, especially in Liberia, who go about chasing mistresses otherwise known as home-wreckers, thereby violating the decency of marital vows and trust bestowed the man and his wife:

Bartholomew Chizoba AkpahMy uncle's relationship and his city women,
year in year out, coming and going.

His old-lady young-girl, sleepy, restless eyes, when
my uncle pulls over at a bar on Broad Street.

Tight skirt or pants, pink, too-bright blouse,
she's by his side. Red, red lipstick, red cheeks,
my uncle's man – stealing Monrovia woman.

She lives in my uncle's office, under his desk (*Where the Road Turns*, 46).

Wesley's “My Auntie's Woman *Lappa* Husband” scratches the itchy pains of phallic dominance over women, especially in Africa where it is almost a no crime for men to have several concubines while fatwa is pronounced on married women who indulge in such flirtatious acts. The double standards which characterize extramarital affairs between men and women in Africa manifest with the men often considered naturally polygamous while it is a grievous

offence for any woman caught in an adulterous act. Blessing Nwodo (2018) pushes this argument further:

In some parts of Nsukka, Enugu state in Nigeria women who commit adultery and therefore violate the oath of fidelity they took before marriage, are said to be struck with madness by the gods. ... I remember asking the local women who told me about this belief if the oath also applies to men. She replied to my question with a nonchalant shrug and robotically said "How could it? African men are naturally polygamous. You know women are different from men".

One can deduce from above that the phallogocentric space and women exist in an unequal stand. That notwithstanding, Wesley's poetry challenges this notion of easy ride by those women *lappa* husbands. The poet persona, against the stern warning from her uncle to mind her "own business", remains rather resolute in exposing the adulterous act of married men in Liberia. This is understandable because as a married woman, she is pained by how her auntie's husband abandons her duly married wife in chase of city women in "Tight skirt or pants".

Wesley's inquisitive eyes capture the guilt in the eyes of one of her auntie's "husband" mistresses as suggested in "His old-lady-young-girl, sleepy, restless eye"! Amidst humor and satire which parodies and scorns at negative vices (Akpah, 2018), Wesley's condemnation is directed against both the woman and the man who are culprits and therefore guilty of infidelity. An infidelity is a detestable act in marriage. In Liberia, it appears to be a common practice nowadays. This, however, negates Liberia's age-long cultural values. According to one of Liberia's popular daily, *Daily Observer* (2014), it is no longer considered a repulsive act for "a woman or a man stepping out of their matrimonial home". The newspaper concludes that our past leaders (allegedly) practised polygamy. Infidelity "has long been embedded into our culture. Should we now denounce our biblical teaching and upbringing, because infidelity is a reality to some Liberians". The crux from above is that infidelity has infiltrated the Liberian marriage institution and gradually becoming a norm among married adults.

Also, polygamy is a deep-rooted cultural practice which permits men the right to marry more than one spouse in a traditional African setting; this is a clash with Christian marriage teachings which espouse one man to a wife. However, Wesley's concern in "My Aunties's Woman *Lappa* Husband" is on Liberian men who claim to practice Christianity and yet fail to live by its doctrinal teachings. These men engage in secret illicit affairs with several women. Polygamy is men's privilege which denies women fairness in also having several men without incurring society's opprobrium. Polyandry which contrasts with polygamy is very uncommon in Liberia. Thus, women's equal freedom to several men is denied as such practice

is considered an abomination in Liberia. Women, therefore, succumb to their fate. They suffer emotional instability and have no choice but to cope with their cheating husbands. Sometimes, these women, in burning rage, pray that their cheating husbands face the dire consequences of their actions. This rage is exemplified in the poet persona's conversation with her aunty:

I tell my Auntie who's taking it all in, in case
you didn't know "Maybe he will settle down one day"
She tells me. "Maybe something will settle him;
a bolt of lightning, an earthquake
a jail sentence, I mean" she says (*Where the Road Turns*, 46)

Wesley's rage against adulterous men in Liberia is evident in the eruption of anger, hate and wish for dreadful punishments such as "a bolt of lightning," an earthquake or "a jail sentence" towards flirtatious married men. She however thinks the Liberian men who commit adultery may eventually escape from tortuous punishments since they are African:

"the purification by fire when Sodom finally
burns itself up to ashes", I add. "Who knows,
maybe he never will settle down,
you know; isn't he African?" (*Where the Toad Turns*, 147)

The poet rhetorically alludes to the ingrained assumption of African men as characteristically polygamous. This privileges the men who demonstrate their sexual power and the upper hand in their choice for a variety of sexual gratification to the detriment of their wives at home.

CONCLUSION

Women in Liberia like their counterparts elsewhere still confront the strains of poor imaging especially negative stereotypes which leave some of them psychologically deranged. The mission of feminist criticism often dwells on exploring the unjust treatment of women. Feminist writers through their creative writings expose the ills of unequal relations between men and women in societies that are mostly favoured by the patriarchal order.

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