

## **Role reversal in the Niger Delta: Insight from Tanure Ojaide's *Stars of the long night***

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### ***Abstract***

*Literature has often served as a tool for mirroring and educating society. It is often used to explore, demonstrate and highlight important issues that plague human existence here on earth. This study focuses on how Tanure Ojaide's **Stars of the long night** mirrors life in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Of course, before the discovery and exploration of oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the people of the area lived happily with one another. Gender roles were clearly defined. Women knew their place in this society and adhered to their traditional roles of being wives, mothers, care givers and home-makers. In addition to these, they engaged in occupations like trading, fishing and farming. There were laws that subordinated and marginalized them. This notwithstanding, they were known to mobilize and contribute positively to the development of their communities. In Tanure Ojaide's **Stars of the long night**, we see a change of trend as women in the Niger Delta, ventured into the male domain in the absence of their male counterpart. The study believes that this role reversal is commendable especially in a community where women are originally seen as weak, docile and second class.*

### **Introduction**

Education is seen as the bedrock of all cultures and civilizations. It is therefore an essential tool for moral, physical, psychological

as well as spiritual development. Writers and critics have employed literacy education in mirroring the society and in entrenching socio-political as well as cultural education. Tanure Ojaide's novel *Stars of the long night* is set in primordial time before the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta region. This region was among the first to encounter and interact with European nations in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. The region was also the first where the British initiated the process of cloning together what became Nigeria in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. "Remarkably, that building block of Nigeria was called the oil River Protectorate to underscore its endowment in palm oil produce. The protectorate was taken over from the Royal Niger Company (later United Africa Company) by the British colonialist in 1885 to start the construction of the Nigerian State" (Darah, 5).

During this time, the people of Agbon co-existed peacefully with one another and gender roles/association was respected. This period was characterized by communal ethos of giving and sharing, where people looked out for each other. Children were communally parented. The society depicted in *Stars of the Long Night* is largely patriarchal, made up of great men who distinguished themselves in their different chosen vocations and trade. These men were farmers, fishermen, carvers, traders, storytellers, basket weavers among others. These occupations suited their milieu as they provided useful services for their communities. Mary Kolawole reasons that "Africa is still largely patriarchal and myths have been manipulated to vindicate women disempowerment in vital public sphere. As a corollary many women internalized such to entrench negative self-image and these internalized myths become as additional burden on women's back that foster self-negation as opposed to self-realization" (54).

African literature started as purely male enterprise. Early

African novelists like Achebe, Soyinka, Armah etc portrayed women in low light, thus encouraging the marginalization of women. Lending credence to the above assertion, Kolawole again opines that "by omission or commission, most male writers in the early phase of African literature encouraged women's marginalization" (79). Flora Nwapa blazed the trail in African writing by women through her debut novel *Efuru*, since this breakthrough by Nwapa and later Ama Ata Aidoo in the mid-60s, African literature has moved from a predominantly male domain. African women's literature has become a reflection and refraction of reality in an overt and unapologetic way. African female writers write from a woman's perspective highlighting the injustices meted on women, thereby developing their consciousness as way of educating and awakening their feminist consciousness.

In addition to peripheral roles, recurrent character type according to Boyce - Davies and Graves include "mothers, wives, prostitutes, temptress and mistresses" (242). Women therefore face limitations which Chioma Opara refers to as "African cultural clogs" (5). Chinyere Okafor adds that "the Arab and European patriarchal order disorganized African political organization and eroded expressions of women's leadership and power" (157).

In a dramatic twist however, Ojaide displays role reversal in the depiction of some female characters in *Stars of the long night*. Women who hitherto were marginalized and trampled upon emerge as strong, assertive, torch bearers who re-shape and re-write the history of the entire Okpara and by extension Agbon community as well as the Niger Delta region in general. By so doing Ojaide, like other writers like Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi wa Thiongo among others, use socio-literacy education in not

only educating but opening the eyes of readers to the important role women play in the socio-cultural development of their community. More importantly, Ojaide joins the rank of other African gyntrists who believe in women's capability in celebrating strong, dynamic African women who do what their male counterparts fail to do. This is also Ojaide's pre-occupation in *The activist* where women mobilized against Bell Oil Company and the Federal Government of Nigeria.

### **Role reversal in Tanure Ojaide's *Stars of the long night***

Ojaide's *Stars of the Long Night* celebrates the Niger Delta of yore. This region according to Amakievi Gabriel "lies between the Forcados River on the West and Brass River in the East. These belts, sandy beach ridges, salt water and fresh water swamp are features in this riverine environment with predominantly mangrove vegetation." (34). In addition, the region is defined as the area drained by the tributaries of the River Niger before it enters the Atlantic Ocean. This definition is devoid of political and economic definitions.

Before the discovery and exploration of oil in this region, the people of Agbon lived traditional life style, bereft of modernity. Customs, traditions and social values were upheld and there was law and order among the various villages and clans. There was also established communal ethos which enabled people interact according to their gender as colonialism was just infiltrating and gaining roots in the area. For example after the day's work like palm oil production which the region was noted for, farming, fishing, carving among others, the men often retire to a joint known as Ohwarha. Ojaide writes that "no town or village grew into the direction of the Ohwarha, since it was not meant to be

intruded into by any form of development. Once they arrived there, the men threw off their guard, became hilarious and noisy, they could talk loosely without being inhibited by concerns for children and women..." (*Stars of the long night* or *Stars*, 31). Women were not allowed here, "should a man's wife come there, she would be insulted by all the men. No man there picked a quarrel with other men for insulting his wife and in fact joined in humiliating his own wife. It was one of the many codes they kept at the joint" (*Stars*, 33).

Lending support to the above claim, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie reiterates that the colonial system negatively encouraged or brought to the fore the traditional ideologies of patriarchy or male superiority which originally existed in African society. This critic argues further that political transformations in Africa are manifold.

Since women are naturally excluded from public affair, they are viewed as unable to hold positions of responsibility, rule men or even be visible when serious matters of state and society are being discussed. Franz Fanon described psychological oppression as the worst form of oppression. The feeling of inferiority affects the economic and political behavior of Africa, denuding them of creativity, self-reliance or productivity.

In addition, Marie Ebo cites Fredrich Engel who opines that the first class oppression coincided with that of the female sex by the male. This critic adds that "together with slavery and private property, it opens the period that has lasted until today in which prosperity and development for some is owned through the misery and frustration of others... in the great majority of cases today, at least in the possessing classes, the husband is obliged to earn a living and support his family and that in itself gives him a position of supremacy, without any need for special legal titles

and privileges within the family, he is the bourgeois and his wife represent the proletariat" (14).

Having been reduced to the state of second class citizens, women function mainly in the domestic sphere. Helen Haste argues that female superiority lies (in the traditional sex role model). This include "child care and also in virtues which can be sustained only by distance from corrupting and roughening influences, gentleness, purity, innocence" (67). Man, Haste claims provide financial support as well as protection (both physical and psychological) which women cannot provide for themselves but need so as to be able to perform their domestic function.

Male superiority therefore rests in contrast in instrumentality, leadership and work rationality and in competition. Women's servicing and serving the men therefore provide the enabling physical and psychological support for them to sustain those attributes which include physical care, stress and reduction and boosting of their morale. Haste cites Richard Gregory, who reasons that "within the terms of this model that women are "perpetual emotion machines" and men are "esteem engines" (67).

In *Star of the Long Night*, Ojaide depicts the important role played by women despite their gender. Teresa Ndongko states that "a man performing a duty which is looked upon as female is ridiculed as a woman who performs labour traditionally assigned to males" (147). Yet Molaria Ogundipe - Leslie submits that "women have been placed as pedestals as goddesses, but imprisoned within domestic injustices (custom has been nothing but a tyranny hidden in every home). They have been romanticized in interactive and lyrics but commercialized in life..." (27). It is also important to note that "women have been

active in the pre-colonial artistic world in rituals, music, dance" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 31). This is seen in the example of Nene is *Stars of the Long Night*. Nene is the mother of all priestesses who commanded respect and men and women were her acolytes. Ojaide writes:

In her white dress of priesthood, she commanded respect from everybody, young and old. She had a motherly presence where she went or appeared. She interceded on behalf of the community for good health, peace and prosperity. Her following was large: women and men were her acolytes. She was revered for the upright way she carried herself. She got more attention whenever there was to be a festival, small or big (*Stars*, 90).

Nene announces the date of the great Edjenu Festival which was held every thirty years. The festival will among other things reduce mishaps and it is seen as the people's hope of surviving natural as well as human - induced disasters:

Today, our holy day of the week, edewo. I proclaim that in three moons shall begin our great Edjenu festival. We should count ourselves fortunate to be alive to witness this festival that hold once in a generation. Let us humans treat our ancestors and gods and let them be proud of us... let men and

women, old and young, all Agbon people prepare for the great festival... May we live to celebrate Edjenu! May Edjenu bring us prosperity, good health and peace! (*Star*, 92).

In addition Nene is saddled with the responsibility of counting the days preceding the festival with cowries, "of the twenty eight-cowries, she would be taking one away every day until the calabash was emptied. The day after the last one was removed would be the first day of the festival" (*Star*, 92). Nene's priestly role calls to mind other great priestesses like Ezenwayi in Akachi Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols*, who according to Chioma Opara (2004) "acts as an intermediary between human beings and deities" (43). Female priestly role and spirituality are also depicted in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, *Achebe's Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. Opara cites Davis and Weaver who state that female spirituality "is a struggle to deal with reality as it is, without imposed limitations" (370).

As the Agbon people diligently prepare for the great Edjenu festival, women were not left out. Kena, who many years ago rejected Amraibure's marriage proposal becomes a young widow, who wants to find a cure for her son's illness. She had earlier rejected a Levirathian marriage and returned to her parents. Meanwhile, Amraibure had nursed the ambition of wearing the mother masquerade. He consulted a diviner who saw that he wanted to seize what belonged to everybody, that he should have waited to be called. Amraibure had gone fishing and got drowned, all effort to find him proved abortive. This created tension, anxiety and suspense in the entire community. During the broom dance therefore, Kena became a great mobilizer of

women. This broom dance precedes the great festival as every woman is mandated to participate. Ojaide writes:

... those who had husbands should leave the children with them. Let Okpara men for once take care of children. Let them clean the children and throw away their shit. Let them be pissed upon. Let them suffer the disquiet of their children's cries. Let them feed the children when hungry before their mothers returned. Let the men bathe the children after soiling themselves at play (Stars, 203).

Unlike before when the men sang derogatory songs to ridicule women (Ighomo songs) which forced some women to withdraw from the dance, this time they defied the men. This is because they had for long been kept at home and they needed to be seen and heard. The broom dance is symbolic because it is a celebration of women's unrecognized work. The innovation in the broom dance heralds the new moon and to "sweep away cobwebs from the face of the sky" (Stars, 207). It is against this backdrop that Stevi Jackson avers that "women's unpaid work is expropriated by their husbands" (333).

Mary Kolawole is of the opinion that among the Ijaws of the Niger Delta, women in pre-colonial traditional society were resourceful and Ijaw women's association had intricate legal and democratic setups. Literature and history are replete with instances of women's mobilization. Some of these include Queen Kambasa of Bonny who ruled successfully over the war-torn Delta around 1450. Other literary examples can be found in the

women's March in *God's Bits of Wood* and Ojaide's *The Activist*, mentioned earlier among others.

Kena and Oyegbe were friends, infact Kena had been Oyehe's "play mother" when they were young. Here Ojaide underscores the need for female bonding among women. Again Kolawole reiterates this fact when she states that "African women's traditional bonding is robust and positive as it is based on cultural, economic, political and spiritual collective action. African women, past and present have been social mobilizers and social actors shaping the world around them(55).

Kena is motivated by the desire to find cure for her sick son, while Oyeghe's motivation in the festival is her love for Obie, the wood carver. She noted that Obie is worried because there was no man to wear the mother-mask. The mother - mask is so named because "everybody comes from the mother's womb" (Stars, 99). Through the use of stream of thought technique, Ojaide explores:

Obie was in the crowd rather despondent. Nothing had indicated to him that the great masquerade would come out. What a miss it would be for people to wait in vain for the Oni-edjo! He had an opportunity to sit close to the drummers and singers, but he decided to stand. Sitting would not calm him. Would Amraibure appear after over a month of hiding fo dance the great mask? If he was gone beyond return, who else would wear the oni-edjo? ... (Stars, 243).

However, the two friends coincidentally entered the

shrine on the day of the festival. As the two women held the mother mask at the same time, there was suspense, "on whose head would it be placed? Whose head would it fit? Both women were eager to wear it... she drew the mask to herself from Kena's hand, as if she wanted to seize it to herself, and with tears of joy suddenly running down her cheeks, she lifted the mask up and placed it over Kena's head" (*Stars*, 244). By "doing what no woman had the audacity to do could pose problems" (*Stars*, 244) but Kena was not bothered. She steadies herself for this great task, as she became transformed. Ojaide writes:

She was no longer Kena. Not Kena? Okpara's daughter. Not Kena, the widow. Not Kena Ese's mother. Not Kena, seeker of a cure for her sick child. Not Kena, a woman. Her own person was obliterated. She was now the oni- edjo, all eyes now focused on her figure. She had become the expected. She was now the called; the carrier of Agbon's prayers. She had become somebody other than herself; the one who carried everybody's wishes, prayers and hope (*Star*, 247).

It was indeed an electrifying moment, as all Agban, young and old had turned out in their beautiful attires for the festival. The smaller masquerades had displayed awaiting the emergence and grand entrance of the great mother-mask. As this mask emerged, there was jubilation and excitement. Kena danced with other small masquerades behind her to the admiration of all

present. The mask (oni-edjo) was very heavy but light on Kena's head. It was colourful, beautiful and dignifying. Again this episode introduced suspense because nobody knew that Kena was carrying the mask. Her "strides were athletic, the type associated with a man in his prime" (*Stars*, 253), while "her body was like a grub's boneless, every movement smooth, vigorous and in a natural rise - and- fall rhythm. Her poise was godly" (*Stars*, 254). Kena's remarkable performance changed the socio-cultural life of women. She became the bold one who filled the void at the most crucial point in the history of her community. Women are thus elevated and brought to the limelight, "they had come out not only for the broom dance but now to present the great mask to the world" (*Stars*, 260).

Kena's remarkable feat heralds an era of change which made Okpara men more charming to their women. Women who went to the Ohwarha joint were no longer mocked. The men realized that one bold step could "reverse outdated customs" (*Stars*, 262). Kena finally finds a cure for her son, while Oyeghe conceived and bore a set of twins-male and female, debunking Okotete's mother's view that "a hen incapable of laying eggs might as well be a cock" (*Stars*, 58) Kena's fame spread throughout Agbon and beyond and her praise name became Uwara, "she proved a worthy counterforce as the uwara to the akpobrisi" (*Stars*, 265).

It is worthy to note that literature is replete with other examples of role reversal. For instance in Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, women buried fellow women and children in the absence of the men during the war. Similarly in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* women buried "Sir", their boss, while the men helped to deliver Sorrow's baby. In order to solve the problem of starvation, Ramatoulaye killed the well-fed ram Vendredi in Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of wood*. Mary

Kolawole states that this symbolic shift in role points to other areas in which women rise to action when men are incapacitated. These Agbon women, Kena, Oyeghe and all others who participated in the festival and boom dance are indeed the stars of the long night.

## **Conclusion**

By reference to the Niger Delta area, Ojaide has shown that women can re-write history through their socio-cultural activities and participation in communal life. This capacity was not possible with the traditional laws that confined women to the kitchen and to such other things like child-bearing, keeping the home clean, etc that are considered not critical to the development of the society. The limits that bounded off the women, give them the description of being weak, docile and naïve are over time depleted by socio-literacy education. With this, more and more women receive privileges and enablement to take over male responsibilities and achieve success. This is evident in a dramatic twist display of strength and might as it is the case with Kena, Oyeghe and other women of Agbon. These women have helped in educating other women of their communities.

The point clearly made is that education is a chief contributor to the enablement and empowerment of women for the purpose of changes that could affect the society positively.

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