

## **Binaric structures and female erasure in Ezra Lim's "Woman"**

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### **Abstract**

The upsurge of discourses in Gender and Feminist studies and theories has garnered new levels of consciousness about the place of the woman in contemporary society. The contemporary African society has been greatly impacted by such discourses and this has led to new writings (poetry, fiction and non-fiction) that confront hitherto unchallenged definitions and positioning of women. Negative representation of the female gender still continues to surface in contemporary African literary texts by males. This essay explores one of such texts by a Cameroonian poet. It discusses various forms of female erasure by showing how binary structures in Ezra Lim's "Womanhood" function to reveal profound ideas of female marginality. Although the poem like many others in Lim's collection titled *Woman (A Collection of Poems)* has a deeply religious tone and mindset, it also conveys strong undercurrents of anti-female sentiments by continually placing the female in a peripheral position. Lim conveys a certain reality (typical Cameroonian cultural experience) from a particular viewpoint that shows women to exist purposely for the good of the men. Lim's religious inclinations play a major role in his definition of the position of the woman in the binary equation.

Keywords: Binarism, Female erasure, religion, African poetry

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The upsurge of discourses in Gender and Feminist studies and theories has garnered new levels of consciousness about the place of the woman in contemporary society. The contemporary African society has been greatly impacted by such discourses and this has led to new writings (poetry, fiction and non-fiction) that confront hitherto unchallenged definitions and positioning of women. Negative representation of the female gender still continues to surface in contemporary African literary texts by males. This essay explores one of such texts by a Cameroonian poet. It discusses various forms of female erasure by showing how binary structures in Ezra Lim's "Womanhood" function to reveal profound ideas of female marginality. Although the poem like many others in Lim's collection titled *Woman (A Collection of Poems)* has a deeply religious tone and mindset, it also conveys strong undercurrents of anti-female sentiments by continually placing the female in a peripheral position. Lim conveys a certain reality (typical Cameroonian cultural experience) from a particular viewpoint that shows women to exist purposely for the good of the men. Lim's religious inclinations play a major role in his definition of the position of the woman in the binary equation between female and male.

In the opinion of structuralist thinkers, a text is a closed order of signs whose meanings are determined by the interplay of its inner order. Derrida takes a view that is contrary to such Structuralist assumptions about texts and the formulation of meaning. To him the text is not a closed order and its meanings are determined through a relation with other texts - intertextuality. In as much as Derrida agrees with structuralists' ideas on the perception of reality through particular a matrix of meanings, he differs with the idea that the said matrix has a fixed order. Derrida questions the idea of a stability, which arises from structuralist thinking that depends on structures that in turn build centres. Derrida argues that Western thought is based on the idea of a center that generates and guarantees meaning. The centre is often the source of power, the privileged in control and has as one of its defining functions to exclude or marginalize the margin - 'other'. Using Derrida's idea of a centre that seeks to marginalize or ignore the margin, this paper analysis the ways through which the speaker in the poem lays claims to the centre

while at the same time pushing the woman to the margin. This marginal experience generates from the viewing of people in terms of binary opposites. The male figure, in the poem, occupies the assumed centre and so defines and places the women insistently at the margin. While reading within the matrix of Derrida's poststructuralist thinking, it is relevant to raise the postcolonial idea of the double burden or margin in the margin. The postcolonial female bear a double yoke – while the postcolonial world is considered the margin, the male in this male considers the woman another margin.

Lim situates the root of gender binarism in the Biblical story of how the woman was created. It is understandable that as a deeply religious individual, the poet interprets almost everything from and in a biblical light. The bible therefore is a major source of inspiration for his interpretation of life and various existential operations. In the poem "Womankind", Lim defines three categories of woman based on the biblical statement made by Adam when he was first presented a woman "Eve". The first stanza of the poem is a direct reference to the biblical text, the words of Adam as he beholds the beauty and splendor of the companion just presented to him.

"This is now bone of my  
Bones and flesh of my  
Flesh; she shall be called 'woman,'  
For she was taken out of man." (Lim, 4)

The rest of the poem builds on the images Adam uses in this passage to establish three types of women and their roles in the life of the man. The poet is in a sense extending the debate on one of the prominent gender/sexual differentiations presented in the bible. Although Adam defines the woman in integral terms, this very first meeting of the opposite sexes establishes a basis of "otherness" by mere virtue of the fact that the creator leaves the act of naming in the hands of Adam. In the poet's allusion to the text, the poetic arrangement places emphasis on certain terminologies that accentuates the binary equation. One of such poetic (re)arrangement can be read in the rhyme scheme. The rhyme scheme is built generally on a regular "aa bb" pattern. In the afore cited

stanza, “my” in the first line rhymes with “my” in the second line and the last syllable of “Woman” rhymes with “man” in the fourth stanza. Man and Woman in the third and fourth lines suggest a level of equality as both genders are given priority positions. This equality is also evoked in the images of “bone” and “flesh”. If the woman is bone of the speaker’s bone, and flesh of the speaker’s flesh then they share equal strength symbolised by the bone and equal weakness as symbolised by ‘flesh’. Ironically, these supposed ‘main’ words and powerful symbols of equality are undercut and their potency undermined by a determiner. The emphasis on “my” undercuts the equality and gives the speaker the power of possession even as he struggles to establish a base of equality. This possessive determiner could signal mere association with the speaker but the prioritization and repetition make the idea of belonging/possession a stronger one. Besides, the emphatic position of the possessive determiner, defining who and what Eve is and giving her the name by which she shall be called for ages, Adam takes the ‘Centre’, and Eve takes the ‘Margin’. In the marginal equation Bill Ashcroft et al. say “it is the centre that creates the condition of marginality” (*Post-colonial Studies*, 125). In this way Adam’s maleness is established and as Phyllis A. Bird puts

His [Adam] maleness is not simply grammatical, however, for he is presented as a peasant cultivator, representing the typical occupation of the ancient Israelite male and signalling a division of labor and a stage of social organization with far-reaching social and political consequences. (524)

Bird’s observation is valid especially if one considers the various perspectives from which some males and biblical scholars use biblical text to justify claims of male supremacy over women. Lim’s “Womankind” presents some of such problematic perspectives with the consequences that Bird previews. Lim gives an interesting reminder about the source of the text and how it has affected male/female relations:

It was old Adam said it.  
Long after he said it,  
Wives have been bones of their men.

Wives have been flesh of their men. (Lim, 4)

The first line seems like a mere reference to the author of the text that makes the first stanza. However, the fact that the line is a run-stop line gives the idea a stronger and independent level of thought that is beyond the mere literary allusion. While it is a way of crediting the words "this is now bone of my bone..." to Adam, the statement provides a platform for the poet to escape from the implications or ramifications attributed to it in the latter stanzas of the poem. The poet shirks responsibility of the gender polarity that the text establishes. However, as shown earlier the poet builds new polarities in the choice and position of words. In the lines "Wives have been bones of their men. / Wives have been flesh of their men. (Lim, 4) positions the female at the beginning of the line and the male at the end. In this way he creates both a female start rhyme (anaphoric rhetoric) and a male end rhyme (rhyme scheme). The female and the male are again placed in positions that give both sexes a form of equality. It is credible even to think that the female occupies a better position of priority in the binary – they are first and male is last. This only helps to give impetus to the binaric structure of thought that typifies the poem. The female gender is placed at a polar first position separated from the male in the polar last place by five words in each of the verse lines.

Besides the polarization of male and female in these lines, the poet also chooses words that create problematic gender definitions. The binary structure can be illustrated thus

1. Wives = men representing Equality
2. Wives  $\neq$  men representing Equal Inequality
3. Wives  $\leq$  men representing seeming equality or inequality
4. Wives  $<$  men representing definite inequality

As already established, equation 1 is a possibility which however is undercut by more than one factor. This is however the desired and sometimes erroneously claimed position. Equation 2 is not a possibility because, as stated earlier, the very fact of naming the woman places the male in the Centre and the female in the Margin. Also from the word choice, the speaker's obsessive use of "my" at a point of emphasis shows

power of possession and thus control. It represents more of the Marxist classless society without an upper class with power and control over a lower class, which is not possible because in every relationship there must be some kind of dominance. Equation 3 represents a position of conflicting interests which like the first three is also evident in the poem. By places female and male at the beginning and ending of the verse line, there is seeming equality, which is invaded but inequality as we are about to show. Arguably, equation 4 best expresses the binary structure and gender representation in the poem.

The choice of words in the lines “Wives have been bones of their men / Wives have been flesh of their men” (Lim, 4) apparently fails to maintain a parallel structure. The major gender terms lack structural balance and these transcends the grammar of it to reflect the absence of balance or the slant in the gender line – a slant that is in the disadvantage of the female. In a parallel structure the terms will correlate thus:

Wives – husbands / Women – men

In the poem “wives” is correlated not to husbands but to “men”. Wives the plural of wife is defined as “a married woman considered in relation to her husband”. The *Lectric Law Library's Lexicon* simply says a wife is “a woman who has a husband”. The woman is defined not in terms of individuality but in terms of marital status which logically ties her to a man. The definition of the female in marital terms affects the position of the female in a dangerous ways. Take for example of marriage in the legal structure of the United States, based on English Common Law, which is the acceptable system in many countries and cultures. This passage explicitly explains such dangers of dependence thus: “Under common law, when a man and woman [get] married, they became a single person in the eyes of the law - that person being the husband” (legal dictionary). This probably is wife the *Lectrix Law Library's Lexicon* names six consideration about a woman among which is the fact that “She is under obligation to love, honour and obey her husband and is bound to follow him wherever he may desire to establish himself: unless the husband, ... renders her life or happiness insecure”. Therefore, by simply referring to women or females as wives, the poet ties or limits the

woman to a particular role or function which is inferior and which the legal system even in advanced nations today does not define fairly.

This linguistic imbalance denies the woman certain privileges, a bias phenomenon that is recurrent in language. In *The Feminist Critique of Language* David Cameron shows the role that language has played in creating or promoting a sexist culture. He points out that language

could be seen as a reflection of sexist culture; or . . . it could be seen as a carrier of ideas and assumptions which become, through their constant re-enactment in discourse, so familiar and conventional we miss their significance.... Thus sexism is not merely reflected but acted out and thus reinforced in a thousand banal encounters. (14)

Lim certainly has become used to feminine nouns but has missed the significance of using one noun in the place of another. The linguistic imbalance (using "wives" to refer to all female) takes away from the female the possibility of being a woman without necessarily being a wife. In this way the poet is suggesting that all females are meant to be wives – to be married. A female becomes a wife only by virtue of marriage; so giving preference to the 'wifeness' rather than the femaleness or womanness as is the case of the male, the female is again defined in prejudicial terms. The value of independence which some women ascribe to themselves is thus taken away in such parallel equation. It also takes away the possibility of individuality because a wife is a married female (without any prejudice against wives who are married men), yet a man is not by any chance necessarily married. Man is a more liberating or free way of tagging the individual whereas wife is given a/n (un)necessary burden of attachment to another person. This can be explained partly from psychosocial and cultural perspective. Ezra Lim is a postcolonial poet from Nso in the North West Region of Cameroon. In his culture like in that of many peoples of the region and country, a woman's worth is measured in her ability to get married and to maintain her home. The womanhood or femaleness from birth is defined largely in terms of how she has to become a wife and how well she has to perform her wife duties

and obligations. The cultural and sociological psycho-dynamics have therefore influenced the poet's perception of women. This also explains why in poems like "Joy 2" and "Marriage Matters", the poet seemingly advocate the traditional system of marriage whereby the parents of the man choses a wife for him when they think that he has come of age.

There is a play with the images that are used earlier in the poem. In the first stanza, the image of bone and flesh occur more as a corresponding pair. These images are taken up in succession and each is made to reflect or represent an exemplar of particular type womanhood and how it affects the man. The bone is made to signify the tough category of women. In it typical female subaltern mode, the tough woman is not seen as a successful woman or one that puts up with the difficulty of men. They are presented as trouble makers as people who make life complex and problematic for men.

Some are only bones.  
These, the hard ones,  
Make life difficult for their men,  
Make life hard for the best men. (Lim, 4)

In this binary structure presented in the above stanza, women are projected in negative terms "bones", "hard", "difficult" while men are projected in one word "best" - a pleasant superlatives term that places men in a position that is far above the world of cruelty where the women are placed. A similar form of representation repeats in the stanza below and takes an even more demeaning outlook at the relationship between male and female. Flesh is the main symbol and is associated with "Frail", and "weak". Interesting, here some men are shown to be weak, a term that has been related to women all along. The weakness of the man is only used to further debase the woman because the weakest man is shown to have the power to "lord over" the woman. The line "taking her here, there, all over" strongly communicates the dominance of the weak man over the woman. There is there excessive denigration of the woman in this stanza, the level of her subalternity is emphasized in most bizarre terms as she is made to be the puppet of even men who cannot command the respect or authority that a man should.

Some are only flesh;



Frail, weak as flesh,  
 For the weakest man to lord over,  
 Taking her here, there, all over.(Lim, 4)

The separation and discussion of each image is great; however there is a lot of “telling” than showing in the representation. By telling, I mean the unwarranted interpretation of the symbols through subordinate phrases like “the hard ones” referring to bones and “weak flesh” referring to flesh. These explanatory phrases do not add much colour to the poeticity in these chapters; on the contrary, they weaken the symbolic power of bone and flesh.

There is a kind of balance at the end but it is again pushed towards gender binaries that place the man at the Centre and the woman at the Margin.

Others; bones and flesh-  
 Hurt or make men fresh.  
 They pay back without reserve,  
 What the men rightly deserve.(Lim, 4)

The third category of women is defined here to be those who are both bone and flesh, probably those old Adam talked about in the first stanza of the poem, and this consoles the reader that no matter how rough or how weak women are there are some who are a blend of both.

The idea of “payback” evokes some interesting ideas in the relationship between man and woman, and this can be traced as far back as the beginning as narrated in the biblical story of creation. The Hebrew creation myth places enormous blame on woman for the fall of man. The woman is known to have yield to the cunning of the serpent and as a result eat the forbidden fruit, which she also talked her husband into eating, thereby causing the act of disobedience that resulted in the troubles that man has encountered throughout history. The idea of pay back can therefore logically be linked to this pain that the woman caused the man. It is worth remembering that the punishment that was accorded to Adam was hard labour, he was told he had to till the earth to feed his family. This is a form of punishment that wears and even tearsthe body. From this focal point, it is easy to understand the reason for which the

poet thinks that the job of the woman is to make the man "fresh". To the poet, the woman owes the man a debt service and/or obedience because she is the cause of his fall. Consequently, any good service that the woman renders to the man is, in the opinion of the poet persona, a way of paying back for the misfortune that she brought upon him. The man deserves this

Like many good poems, "Womankind" is constructed principally through duplication or reoccurrence: isotaxy - repetition of structure; isophony - repetition of sounds, and isotopy - repetition of theme. These are semantic categories which make possible the uniform reading of the poem. The repetition of sound referred to as isophony deals with the "recurrence of phonemes, like in rhyme, assonance and alliteration" (Eliane Kotler). In "Womankind" the rhyme scheme follows a regular pattern – stanza one is "aa, bb"; stanza two is "cc, dd"; stanza three is "ee ff" and so on. Other phonic devices that repeat in the poem are anaphora and alliteration in lines like "Wives have been bones of their men. / Wives have been flesh of their men" (Lim 40). The repetition of these sounds gives a uniform pattern to the reading of the poem. This uniformity conforms to the gender roles that the poet ascribes to men and women. The poem is also consistent in the repetition of structure – "Womankind" is a twenty-line poem divided into five stanzas of four lines each. Here isotaxy or the repetition of the same structural division allows each stanza to take up a particular idea which is related to the idea of gender difference and discrimination, and reveals yet another category of repetition known as isotopy, which is the repetition of a basic meaning trait. Throughout the poem the stream of thought is somewhat consistent as it develops from Adam's definition of woman through the categorization of different type of women and how they affect men to the last stanza where the categorization unite in a single form of woman who is performing the subaltern role that women are assigned from the beginning of the poem.

Intertextual play between texts and subtexts find expression in "Womanhood". Poststructuralist critics have established the argument that every text is woven from an endless number of phrases, forms, fragments, expressions. There is therefore no original or pure text

because every text is made from other texts - poststructural intertextuality. The allusion from the bible book of Genesis situates "Womankind" within this context of poststructuralist intertextuality. The poem is made up of subtext from Christian religion, Nso cultural wisdom, and the personal experiences of the poet. In this symbiotic interplay between texts the sub-text, which is positioned in a 'new' text, derives new meanings which are in most cases different from the meanings it has in other texts. The biblical passage used in the poem adopts new meanings and the images of flesh and bone resurface in new and refreshing ways.

The analysis has focused on the negative representation of the female in one of Ezra Lim's poems "Womanhood". The intermeshing of traditional African cultural values (dominantly patriarchal) and Christian religious values are at the heart of female marginalization in Lim's creative force. In the western urban setup, socialist feminists hold that "*female marginalization* in the work force is a result of the intermeshing of capitalism and patriarchy". The biblical base of Lim's gender binarism is one of those acts that bring people to a sense of greater self-knowledge of how the attempt to define the other leads to the definition of ourselves. By defining the female as the "other", Lim unconsciously makes himself the other "other" which must function with the female other in the binary equation of creation. Phyllis Bird puts this even better when she says "We grasp our common nature through multiple acts of self-transcendence in which we confront one another as other-but in that confrontation recognize the other as "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" (534). In Lim's "Womanhood", most of the poetic lines are filled with linguistic expressions that reveal the internal tensions that categorize the male and female genders in distinct hierarchical orders that place the male at the centre and the female at the periphery. Cameron says sexist language "cannot be regarded simply as the 'naming' of the world from one, masculine perspective; it is better conceptualized as a multifaceted phenomenon occurring in a number of quite complex systems of representation, all with their places in historical tradition. (14). Lim's use of gender divisive language is an example of such "quite complex system of representation" (Cameron 14) that denies the female

the possibility of enjoying some existential privileges. Margaret Piercey says "Through the use of sexist language women are effectively eliminated and excluded from the day- to-day reality that they exist (113). Such exclusion and elimination takes multiple forms ranging from naming, through defining and ascribing of particular roles or functions as has been analyzed in Lim's "Womanhood".

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