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FEMALE EMANCIPATION AND THE GENDERED SUBALTERN IN ABIMBOLA ADELAKUN'S *THE BROWN RUSTED ROOFS*

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Abstract

In the current post colonial writing, the field of gender, in relation to women, has been of much debate evidenced in many critical outputs. The women, identified as 'the other sex' and their emancipation process, have received much attention in the twentieth century without much consideration to a sub-group within the group regarded and treated as feminine. Gayatri Spivak, a post colonial scholar and other critics have posited that the gendered subaltern subject is marginalized and oppressed not only for being a woman but also for being uneducated. For the sub-group, the gendered subaltern's emancipation is conditioned on feminist theoretical conceptions without its concomitant awareness that it operates feminist philosophy at the grass-root where it is domiciled. This paper, therefore, appraises how the gendered subaltern in Abimbola Adelakun's Under The Brown Rusted Roof rises above limitations controlling her socio-cultural, economic and religious existence. The work adopts Akachi Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminist theory to show that the gendered subaltern, in this text, is a liberated woman who has moved beyond 'separatism' to 'communionism' and has learnt to gradually crawl like the snail to accomplish her pursuits.

Keywords: emancipation, gendered subaltern, Snail Sense Feminism.

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Introduction

Feminist literature has garnered much attention in the 21st century and this is because more women are becoming aware and enlightened about their position and relevance in the society. Women who want to be labelled the "other sex" in the home, society and at large are few if such still exist. The concern of this paper is with the uneducated and semi-literate women who are labelled as traditional and archaic women.

The term subaltern is taken from Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebook (1971) where subaltern euphemistically stands for the proletariat, who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. The subaltern class includes the peasants, workers, women, and other groups denied access to 'hegemonic power' (Mahum). In her work ''Can the Subaltern Speak?'' Spivak traces the historical, economic and geo-political conditions that prevent the agency and voice of the gendered subaltern on the other side of the international division of labour from being represented. Using the Sati ritual in India, she demonstrates how patriarchy and culture can influence the lives of the subaltern Indian woman in doing as the society demands and not what she feels is right. Spivak is clearly committed to articulating the agency and experience of the disempowered subaltern women. She believes that only the subaltern can speak about the challenges they go through in the society (Morton 100-113).

In speaking about themselves, literature has been a good agency to delineate any information about the subaltern. In talking about the relevance of literature to the subaltern, Shandilya asserts that Literature is self- avowedly invested in the process of narration since the "real" subaltern is unable to represent or re-present herself through writing, any attempt to write subaltern subjectivity is always an imagined projection. Literature allows us to read subaltern agency in the interstices of narrative voices that purport to re-present/represent her. In other words it is in the gaps, silences and caesuras of the elite narration of subalternity that we may find subaltern agency (2).

Scholars such as Abimbola Adunni Adelakun, Buchi Emecheta, Akachi Ezeigbo, to mention a few, have helped in resuscitating the subaltern and lending her a voice in their various literary works. Ezeigbo is particularly known for fighting the cause of the gendered subaltern in her famous trilogy: *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), *The House of Symbols* (2001), and *Children of the Eagle* (2002). Aside Ezeigbo's trilogy, works such as *The Joys of Motherhood*, and Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*, which is the focus of this paper, project the lives and being of the subaltern. We see the women divided between tradition and modernity. Modernity versus tradition is a major challenge faced by women especially uneducated or semi-literate women. There is always a pull towards modernity by these subaltern who feel that their essence is justified by being civilised. Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* exemplifies this tug of war faced by women. We see Mara the protagonist living in a limbo of being the cultural wife or the city wife.

To appropriate the study of the subaltern, this work utilises Akachi Ezeigbo's Snail Sense Feminist theory to show that Nigerian subalterns have moved from voicelessness to a gong filled with sound and effect. Though the sound might be intermittent, it is a gradual development compared to being voiceless.

Snail Sense Feminism and the Gendered Subaltern

Snail sense feminism was propounded by Akachi Ezeigbo. The theory was first presented at a round-table discussion on Feminism in Africa at the International Conference: "Versions and Subversions in African Literature", which took place in Berlin, Germany in May 2003 (Ezeigbo 48). Speaking on her theory, she defines it as a 'result of an in-depth research or investigation into the condition of Nigerian women, their reaction and response, to socio-cultural and political forces that impacted and still impact on their lives in the past and in contemporary times (48).

The scholar argues that in spite of the theorising and analysis done over the years on feminism, the problems women experience in the society still persist. She states further that the principles of shared values which operate in many cultures in Nigeria encourage one to be tolerant, imbibe the virtues of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance (Akanmode 17).

Ezeigbo avers that the Nigerian woman needs realistic, practical and functional models which she can relate with, stressing that these models must take into cognisance the environment and peculiarity of her situation. The snail sense feminist theory is a model that can be adopted by Nigerian women because it takes into consideration the relationships that exist between women and men:

> Women in our cultures-from different parts of Nigeria-often adopt a conciliatory or cooperative attitude towards men. This is akin to what the snail does with the environment in which it moves and exists. The snail crawls over boulders, rocks, thorns, crags, and rough terrains smoothly and efficiently with well lubricated tongue which is not damaged or destroyed by these hard objects… the snail carries its house on its back without feeling the strain. It goes wherever it wishes in this manner and arrives at its destination intact. If danger looms, it withdraws into its shell and is safe. This is what women often do in our society to survive in Nigeria's harsh patriarchal culture. It is this tendency to accommodate or tolerate the male and cooperate with men that informs this theory which I call snail-sense feminism. (Ezeigbo 27)

Snail-sense feminist theory believes in a complementary relationship between women and men in the society. Just like most African feminist theories, each sex must work together to form an ally against violence and oppression. This complementary role is one factor that has distinguished African feminist theory from the Western variant. Besides the complementary trait, one other factor that is striking about snail sense feminism is the individualistic feature ascribed to the snail. The snail is seen alone, not in the company of other snails, but that does not mean it does not interact with other snails. Ezeigbo asserts that the individual must empower herself before she can empower others. She must stand before she can help others to stand. The pursuit of individual success and development is central to snail-sense feminism (28). This personal success should not rely solely on being educated within the four walls of a school, it might be in terms of skill acquisition and empowerment programmes geared towards improving and developing the gendered subaltern. Aside the individualistic feature of the snail-sense theory, the theory also employs two other features in accomplishing the desired effect on the Nigerian woman. First is effective dialogue and negotiation as against violence and second is the acquisition of good education. These three: dialogic negotiation, education and individualism make up the tenets of the snail-sense theory.

However, Niyi Osundare, a Nigerian scholar has criticised this variant of feminism and regarded it as an ill-suited model for the Nigerian woman. He is of the opinion that the Nigerian woman should not be compared to a snail that is slow, weak and sluggish. Reacting to this criticism, Ezeigbo points out that there are qualities about the snail that triggered her endorsement of the snail-sense feminism which are doggedness and the ability to get round obstacles no matter how formidable by exercising effective skills and sensitive attitude and that it has nothing to do with speed and movement. Rather, the emphasis is on the ability of the snail to smoothen rough spaces to enable it to make its movement easy (37).

How then does the subaltern appropriate the snail-sense theory? The subaltern women though limited in education, and referred to as 'traditional' have unconsciously in their unassuming way been acting on the models of snail-sense feminism. First, the subaltern, having realised their precarious position in the society, have used their limitation to influence change with the act of dialogue and negotiation in the homes and the society at large. Moreover, the high rate of domestic violence within the educated women circle is a clarion call that education does not put a stop to violence but that women whether literate or not must join forces to act like a snail out of their pain and repression. The subaltern have shown considerable strength in the face of adversity and mastered how to gently but firmly make a change in their environment over the years for scholars to pay attention to them.

Snail-Sense feminist models and Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*

The novel, *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*, is an individual story narrated in a communal pattern. It tells the story of the polygamous household of Chief Arigbabuwo and the surrounding Agbooles. It reflects the intrigues, politics, joys and pains of being a father, mother, or child in a polygamous set-up. In warm, passionate, truthful, riveting rib-cracking language, Adelakun digs deep into the heart of women and the relationships that characterise traditional family life. Her consideration for the less educated woman and her survival within a socio-cultural environment connects her work to Akachi Ezeigbo's snail sense theory.

Ezeigbo refers to the snail as being "wise, sensitive, resilient and dogged or determined. Nigerian women are all these and more. They work hard, are tenacious and patient" (28). In Adelakun's text, one character that exhibits these attributes is Afusa, the second wife of Alhaji Chief Arigbabuwo of Agboole Alabeni. She is described as an easy-going person by her husband and despite the backstabbing, death of a son and travails encountered in a polygamous home, she remains strong and resolute in her decision to stand out. Being the favourite wife, the other wives are jealous of her and often find ways of disparaging her in the presence of her husband. In a conversation between Iyale Agba and Alhaji the former has this to say about Afusa:

> She was never good. It was because she never had a rival, that was why we did not know her true character. Ever since you brought Sikira home, she has been full of evil. It is a good thing you married Sikira (20).

Alhaji, understanding the antics of Iyale Agba replies thus:

> It's a good thing you married Sikira for me, Alhaji corrected and was silent as he thought about what she just said. "Well, sometimes, I wish I had not accepted her. Sikira is a troublemaker. You know Afusa is my real choice of a woman. (21)

To Alhaji, a real woman is known by her acts of kindness, intelligence, gentleness and versatility. She is not perturbed by rivalry nor does she engage in irrelevant talk like the other wives do. Because of his love for her, the other wives believe that Afusa has charmed Alhaji but unknown to them, Afusa has imbibed the skill of dialogue and negotiation. That is why in her pursuit in Alhaji's house she knows "when to keep her mouth shut" (20). In keeping her mouth shut she saves herself from being beaten by Alhaji, unlike Sikira who is mercilessly beaten by their husband because she has not acquired the skill of dialogue and negotiation. In dialogue and negotiation, language and choice of words are important factors in maintaining a simple and peaceful life. In Alhaji's home, Adelakun shows the reader that Afusa talks when it is necessary and appropriate. She does not go about gossiping like Sikira, and her words are full of wisdom. This skill is also replicated when Afusa advises her husband about his political career. She makes him see the bigger picture in getting involved in politics though he is an illiterate:

> Where is that small boy coming from that you have not been before? If a child should have as many clothes as an elder, can he boast of the same number of clothes that have become rags as the elders? If you think education is that important, you can win Akowe to your side. He is a small boy and is educated. He will be loyal to you. His father was your father's friend. You will use your wealth and experience to beat any opponent. (41)

Alhaji is so shocked at her vast knowledge of politics that he asks her: "how come you talk like a man?" (108). Alhaji in his myopic and patriarchal view can only concede knowledge to a man because it is believed that a woman is weak and cannot acquire certain knowledge to oust a man. In comparing her to a man, it shows her strength, wisdom and versatility even when he, Alhaji does not have an inkling on the subject being discussed. This is the reason why Alhaji refers to Afusa as "… that tree that has supported my fence and prevented it from falling" (206). Adelakun posits that the absence of formal education should not be an excuse for the subaltern woman not to function effectively and compete favourably with her male contemporary. Afusa also displays her patriotic nature by not allowing politicians buy her votes with their niceties. She refuses to be lured into 'sharing Abiola's rice', knowing that the rice is a means of buying her loyalty. She expresses her thought to Alake:

> "I don't believe in such gifts. Now that Abiola wants to become our president, he knows he should share rice…"
> "When you go, collect mine with yours," Afusa said. "The pious devotions of a cat, is it not a trick to steal meat? You will be surprised that once you vote him in, he will stop giving you rice." (222).

For an uneducated woman living among uneducated people, her vast knowledge of politics cannot be glossed over. Unlike other Agboole occupants who will sell their vote to replenish their stomach, Afusa distinguishes herself from Sikira, and Alake by living a pious and nationalistic existence.

Furthermore, in the novel, sexuality is discussed to show that sex is a general topic that is examined by both the educated and the non-educated women. Though in a traditional setting, sexual discussion is frowned at because "it is an exaggeration for

a woman to say that her husband is not fucking her properly…" (205), we see Afusa using sex as a means of dialogue and negotiation with her husband:

> Somehow, Alhaji always looked forward to being with Afusa in a strange exciting way. There was something about her that was missing in others. He had a good feeling about her. She was not like Motara who was frigid. Neither was she like Sikira who just made noise. She knew what to do and how to do what to do. With her he found himself talking after the act. She would listen patiently to him and make her comments. Then she would offer herself to him again. If she had any request or permission to take, she waited till the next day. She, unlike others, never brought her requests to the bedroom. (41)

From the above excerpt, it is evident that Afusa has mastered the art of love making, and has realised that it is a form of communication that involves two people; the giver and the receiver. While pleasuring her husband, she becomes the snail that is a symbol of ease, easing away the tension and built up anger in her husband, at the same time tendering her request to a man that is fully satiated. Truthfully, why won't a man revere a woman like Afusa! The author makes a quick comparison between the lovemaking of Afusa and her husband to that of Baba n'Sale and his wife, Risi:

> Risi did not reply. She was doing her best to make herself comfortable as she could manage on her husband's bed and when she had managed to get a little comfort, Baba n'Sale asked if she was undressed. She quickly loosened her wrapper. He mounted her while she struggled to stay in one place despite the bed which kept making her buttocks enter into that large hole where the springs were loose. "Be still!" he commanded in a loud voice. "It's not my fault," she whimpered. "It is the bed." He hissed. When he had heaved himself two more times, he ejaculated and came off her. He moved his body back to his space on the bed and was soon asleep. (93)

The sexual act described above is a mechanical and loveless act that is not questioned by the wife who feels it is her cultural duty to satisfy her husband without taking cognisance of her own satisfaction. Not minding the discomfort caused by the squeaking bed, Risi lays on the bed like a lamb taken to the slaughter. No wonder, when Baba n'Sale dies, Risi and her co-wives did not mourn him but rather sought how to get his properties for a better tomorrow. Conversely, Adelakun uses Afusa to reconstruct the sexual myth within the traditional circle. Sex is no longer used as a tool of objectification but as a tool of freedom, pleasure and victory. Afusa never sees herself as a sexualised object, rather she uses her sexuality within traditional boundaries to implement a circle of change.

Though she is not "formally educated", her love for education is undisputed. This is seen in her tenacity in helping her children with their school work:

> She taught her first son the alphabets by gazing into his alphabet book for long and mastering the letters. When she was sure of herself, she showed him how to write it by instructing him to trace the way the letters were written and do same in his exercise book. The boy had to repeat ABC everyday until he not only knew it, she knew it as well. She knew how to count 1,2,3, as a result of her trading experience and she taught her son up to the point which she knew. (53)

Afusa is portrayed here as a woman who is eager to learn. She pays attention to her children's books and while teaching them also self-teaches herself. She is not like some parents who leave their children to be tutored by private home teachers. She pays adequate attention to her children. There is therefore a bond that exists between her and her children. This is the reason why she is the first to notice her son, Sikiru's decision to opt out of school and follow the career path of his step brother, Ramoni, the singer. In her role as a mother, she is able to convince her son to stay back in school by appealing to his conscience:

> I wanted you to go to school, my son. Do you think that you being in school, you are not better off than he is? Can the kind of nonsense he sings be what people will listen to forever?… Education is the thing now. You don't see how people's eyes spark with envy each time your brothers come back from the university? Don't you want that for yourself? Sikiru, please, I beg you. (218,184)

Unknown to Afusa, the plea to her son to go back to school is in tandem with the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) of the United Nations signed in September 2000 to achieve universal primary education. She is, therefore, a patriotic subaltern.

Her love for education is also displayed in her refusal to pay for Iyaloja's party 'andco' but rather to use the money to pay her children's school fees. Though she is insulted for being stingy and is denied the privilege to collect the cloth on credit, she stands her ground because she values education and understands the merits attached it. At the end of the day, Afusa's children become role models to other children within the Agboole neighbourhood:

> The worst that can happen is for me not to show up and I don't think there is any compulsion in that. I have told you, I cannot use toro to borrow dollar. I have to pay my children's school fees now that there is no more free education, buy their books, do everything! I won't be happy if my children are sent out of school for even a day. I don't do my things that way. My children's education is far more important… (126, 156)

Besides sending her children to school, Afusa trains them without following traditional gender roles. Though she is blessed with three boys she refuses to treat them specially by making them feel that boys should not partake in household chores.

> "Kazeem!" Afusa shouted. "If you don't grind that pepper very well, I will dust you with a broom."… "He had better not spoil my pepper for me. I won't say because I don't have a female child, I should now do all the work in the house myself." (140)

In her unassuming way, Afusa breaks the dualism attached to gender roles. She realises that whether male or female, they are all equal and one sex should not be superior to the other.

One thing that separates Afusa from the rest is that she listens, asks questions and observes her environment just as the snail does. It is through her acquired knowledge over the years that she helps her husband in his political career and business, her sons in their educational pursuit and her fellow women.

Afusa undauntedly stands against tradition when she stops giving birth after three children. Though an illiterate, she is of the opinion that 'one should not have too many children than one cannot care for'. This statement in itself is a taboo within the cultural setting, where people believe that one does not know which of the children

will bury one, and where procreation is regarded to be essential. The similarities between Afusa and Adaku in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* cannot be over emphasised. These two women are strong and relentless in their pursuit and realise early that there must be a balance between the private and public spheres. No wonder they are both successful at home (with their children) and in their respective businesses. Sikira, Afusa's co-wife, on the other hand, believes that one should have as many children as possible because it is God that takes care of children and also that until one has enough male children to inherit large portions of property that one should not stop giving birth. Furthermore, Alake, one of the wives in Agboole, uses pregnancy as a way of avoiding house chores. So the more times she gets pregnant the less domestic problems and duties she does.

Another way Afusa defies tradition is by going to her shop knowing fully well the Oro masquerade is parading the street of Agbeni. Since she came to the realisation that it is a mortal man under the mask of the Oro, her fear for it has vanished. She responds to Motara's fear of Oro in this way: "I am going to my shop. It is not passing through Agbeni yet. Since I have seen it before and it did me nothing, I don't think it can anymore" (158).

Afusa's knowledge is not just for herself or immediate family, she uses the slightest opportunity she has to educate her fellow women on issues that concern the female folk. On one occasion, she advises and counsels the women on the benefits of a balanced diet on the health of a child. In her discussion she emphasises that the 'abiku or emere' child does not exist: "They said that it is because our children don't get enough care, that is why they die. That is what I heard on radio" (214). The other women are shocked at this revelation, especially when they can point to a few women who allegedly have 'abiku' children. Majority of them cannot believe that giving a child hefty bowl of amala without meat or fish is not balanced diet. Afusa, with the help of another emancipated subaltern, enjoins the women to give their children 'meat, fish and egg for a smoother skin' unlike 'rubbing a good osun' on their body. Just like the snail, Afusa is cognisant of the changes happening around her and she pays attention to any means of information dissemination to help her in her transformation sojourn. In paying attention to her environment, she is aware of those things in her culture and society which she needs to imbibe and those that should be eradicated. This awareness helps her in counselling other women who might have treated her like an outsider if she had not understood and known their way of life.

Besides her penchant for learning, we see in the text Afusa's individualistic traits which define her as a person. She is not only a wife to one of the richest men in Ibadan, but is also a self made woman in her chosen profession. She is known for her aggressive business acumen in the market place, which makes her stall never to be short of goods unlike the rest of the women at the market. In the novel, Adelakun deliberately portrays to the readers the subaltern's penchant for work. The first page of the novel opens with the women going to their various places of work. The author demonstrates to the reader that the subalterns are not lazy women compared to their educated counterparts. Though not seen in the public sphere or political meetings, her husband knows the brain behind his political career. He attests to this while speaking with Kazeem, Afusa's second child: "Thanks to her shoulders that didn't let clothes fall off my body" (248). In her doggedness, Afusa is able to develop herself psychologically,

financially and knowledge wise. In the text, she shows support by giving her husband certain amount of money when he needs to pay Baba n'Sale's hospital bill. She does not live her life for her children, husband or the community like Nnu-Ego, but balances her public and private domains without dissension.

Conclusion

The paper has interrogated the tenets of dialogue and negotiation, education and individualism in Ezeigbo's Snail-Sense Feminist theory to show that the gendered subaltern as symbolised by Afusa in Adelakun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*, in her unassuming ways has unconsciously been building her life on feminist models. These models have helped in giving her a voice in her home and society at large and it is believed that this will transcend to our socio- political scene. Though the emancipation is still gradual, as lone voice it can make a loud noise with patience and tenacity.

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