

Beware of Women: Analyzing the Market Literatures of Nigeria

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Abstract:

In the 1940s pamphlet literature burgeoned into a profitable industry in the market town of Onitsha, in Nigeria. As the pamphlets, also referred as 'chapbooks', were printed, and circulated in the market town of Onitsha this genre of literature came to be popularly known as Onitsha Market Literature. According to scholars like Obiechina (1973) Onitsha Market Literature is the 'literature of the mass' and it soared to popularity due to its cheap retail price and the lucidity of language. Obiechina further argues that Onitsha Market Literature represented the 'sentiments of an emergent urban culture'. The most interesting characteristics of these pamphlets was the didactic element, which dominated the thematic core of both the fictions and non-fictions, the central concern being to educate and guide the audience. The authorial intentions were sometimes clearly identified through the titles of the pamphlets; *Beware of Women*, *Why Boys don't trust their girlfriends?* *My seven daughters are after young boys*, *A Woman's Pride is her husband*; etc. According to Stephanie Newel (1996) Onitsha pamphlets presented a 'new female identity', which was a product of 'decolonization' and 'urbanization'. However, what structured this 'new female identity'? Who were the authors of these pamphlets? Were there any women authors, who were also instrumental in creating this 'new identity'?

Around the 1970s another form of 'literature of the mass' started making a mark in the urban areas of Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, Kaduna and Zaria. However, as Kano was the lead in the production of these texts the pamphlets, produced during this period, came to be known as the Kano Market Literature. According to Novian Whitsitt (2003) Kano market literature possessed aesthetic, themat-

tic, and social similarities with the Onitsha ‘chapbooks’. Thus, like Onitsha Market Literature, did Kano Market Literature also aim at creating a ‘new female identity’? How did ‘decolonization’ and ‘urbanization’ affect the Market Literature of Kano? Therefore, through the methodology of Comparative Literature the proposed paper aims to find possible answers to the posed questions.

Keywords: Market Literature, Nigeria, Decolonization, Urbanization, Identity

In the late 1940s the production of literary pamphleteering emerged in the town of Onitsha, in Nigeria. This phenomenon became popularly known as the Onitsha Market literature due to its inception in the market town. In 1947 a local company, called Tabansi Bookshop, published *Ikolo the Wrestler and Other Igbo Tales* and *When Love Whispers*. These two were among the first pamphlets to be published in the market town of Onitsha. After these, *Tragic Niger Tales*, by Chike Okonyia, was published in the same year. Due to the instant popularity of these pamphlets the production of the pamphlet literature started accelerating. By the 1960s pamphlet literature became a notable industry. Though the pamphlet industry spread to other towns in Nigeria; like Port Harcourt, Aba and Enugu; Onitsha remained the central market of pamphlet production in Nigeria. There are many reasons which triggered the production of pamphlet literature in Onitsha. The first being the conducive location. Situated near the river Niger, Onitsha was regarded as the point of contact between the hinterland, mid-western and western Nigeria. Therefore, Onitsha attracted the European traders and missionaries, which transformed the town

into an educational and commercial hub. The contact with the missionaries led to the establishment of churches and schools. Besides this the flourishing commerce at Onitsha also led to the setting up of a Nigeria-owned printing press, which started attracting potential publishers and authors. The strategic location of the city attracted readers across different parts of Nigeria. During 1946 the government, under the control of Britain, sold their used printing presses to the traders in Onitsha, who used these discarded machines to produce cheap novelettes and chapbooks. Due to the non-existence of public library in eastern Nigeria, at that point of time, the popularity of the Onitsha Market Literature soared. The cheap retail price of the texts also augmented the popularity of this market literature.

Most of the authors of the Onitsha Market Literature were amateur writers, who were employed as school teacher, book sellers, clerks, students, journalists, traders, farmers, and artisans. For most of these authors writing was a hobby, nurtured for an extra income. Many writers chose to write in English as it was the official language of Nigeria. Perhaps the other reason to resort to English was to make the pamphlets available to the multilingual people of Nigeria. Most of the authors were not proficient in English and did not have a formal education. The contents, of these pamphlets, were structured with syntactical mistakes and spelling errors. Sometimes, the authors borrowed extensively from 18th century English literature, which made the language of the content quite archaic. However, the authors employed their best efforts to keep the diction simple as their intended audience not only constituted of the educated mass but also the semi-literate ones. The authors aimed at focusing on the social problems and providing possible solutions to it.

The themes of the pamphlets ranged from issues related to social evils, advice on morality, love, marriage, economics, local history, indigenous tales, proverbs, and even 'self-help'. These pamphlets were profoundly influenced by changing cultural habits and the conflicts between 'old' and 'new' values. A deep speculation

reveals the fact that the authors were preoccupied with the problems of the society, enmeshed in conflicting desires, values and attitudes. The authors attempted to guide the people, caught in the dilemma of social changes. There were different authorial intentions, which could be contextualized through these pamphlets. Some authors intended to educate the masses concerning the social changes and prepare them to make the best out of the changing situations, while others simply focused on providing entertainment to the audience.

However, an interesting fact about Onitsha Market Literature is that it hardly records the contribution of any women authors. The works of very few women writers were published. The book *Market Literature from Nigeria: A Checklist (1990)*, which is available in British library, records the presence of only four women authors; Margaret U. Ekpo, Esther Kike Elizabeth, Miss A.I. Nwafor and Ema Brown. (Newell, 1996) However, there is no trace of the narratives produced by them. Perhaps, it is not wrong to presume that the other women authors must have used either pseudo names or just the initials of their names, due to which it has become difficult to locate them.

As already mentioned, the novelettes of the popular market literature, from Onitsha, expressed a preoccupation with 'marriage' and 'love'. Women, who were the subjects of these narratives, were structured as socially destructive. Therefore, the thematic core of the Onitsha pamphlets reflects 'deviant femininities.' Onitsha pamphlets appear as the 'literature of suspicion' as most of the themes of these narratives project the fact that women are experts in disguising their true characters. Throughout Ogali's *Caroline, the one Guinea Girl* (1960) the proverb "all that glitters is not gold" was repeated. A crude revelation of 'women's sexual guilt' reverberated through these narratives. In the novelette *Beware of Harlots and Many Friends* (1963) by J.O. Nnadozie, which is in epistolary form, men wrote to their friends about the 'evil' wives, who were accused of lacing food with poison and covering up the deed with gestures of affection. Therefore, in this narrative, the author advises the

readers to keep a close vigil of their wives. This 'masculine paranoia' has been observed in other narratives also; like *Beware of Women* (1960) by N.O. Njoku and *Beware of Dangerous Ladies* (1963) by Olusola Asani. The preoccupation to project women as deceitful; an expert in disguising their lethal nature; is a form of 'psycho literary response' to the 'urban dislocation' in Nigeria, during the period of 1950s and 1960s. Through Cyril Aririguzo's *The Work of Love* (1963) the emergent urban mentality, expressing social dislocation, can be identified. The author highlights in the narrative the change in the social mores and how it was necessary to construct a new set of 'urban moral codes.' (Aririguzo, 1963) Although Emanuel Obiechina (1973) comments that through these narratives the authors were trying to negotiate with the tensions of decolonization and rapid urbanization, scholars, like Newell (1996), counter this argument by pointing to the fact that these authors, in the name of reconstructing social order objectified women. The themes of 'love' and 'marriage' were treated superficially, whereas the dominant motif was 'female infidelity'.

Onitsha pamphlet is a product of the complex period of decolonization in Nigeria, where on one hand the colonized subjects are trying to come out of the shackles of imperialistic control but on the other hand are they are unconsciously imitating and appropriating the culture of their erstwhile masters. A complex 'masculine ideology' can be located in these pamphlets, where the artist anxiously re-invents and re-presents women to a male addressee to maintain the patriarchal control of changing social and cultural formations. This masculine dominance works through the representation of women as a 'negative sexual stereotype.' These authors created an emergent urban masculine ideology, constructing women as either promiscuous wives or prostitutes; a class of 'money grabbing beauties.' Onitsha Market Literature reflects a heightened 'insecure masculinity'. The emergent ideology of Onitsha Market literature revolves around the image of 'socially destructive' women, like, "prostitutes, money-grabbing beauties, promiscuous wives, and husbandless Highlife-dancer." Onitsha pamphlets almost appear as a body

of 'literature of suspicion' expressing a heightened masculine 'paranoia'. The author of *Beware of Harlots and Many Friends* (1963) J.O. Nnadozie lists a set of letters, written by men, accusing their wives of lacing their food with poison and to avoid this predicament, the following advices have been recorded in the pamphlet; "To see that they (the wives) are not wandering as harlots. 2. To save and free their lives from bad disease." (Nnadozie, 1963) The same masculine 'paranoia' can be located in N.O. Njoku's *Beware of Women* (1960), where he relates to his readers that their potential enemy can find ways to kill them through their wives. In this context the 'wife' emerges as the 'femme fatal'. Besides this, a number of pamphlets also focus on 'erring femininities.' Olusola Asani in *Beware of Dangerous Ladies* (1965) counsels the readers in the following manner;

"The notion of this booklet is to reveal the secrecy and the tricks of our young girls of nowadays...(because) it is not possible for a young man whether married or unmarried to live happily without at first knowing how to get rid of our modern mendacious and honey tongued girls who are squeezers of the scanty sum usually paid to my dear gentle-men as their monthly income" (Asani, 1965).

A close speculation of the pamphlets reveals a degree of tension, coupled with paranoia and therefore most of the titles as well as the content of the narratives are structured like a warning. In *An Ideal Wife to Marry* (1965) Obodiechi writes, "Beware of extremely exquisite and paragon resembling figures of attraction devoid of senses and culture because they do not always prove good housewives." (Obodiechi, 1965) To highlight his claim the author further asserts that the external beauty of the women conceals their amoral soul. The image of the 'infidel female' is recurrent in the pamphlet narratives of Onitsha. J. O. Nnadoze depicts how 'Nigerian' women are only after money. In *What Women are Thinking about Men* (1971) he writes; "Beware... they only love your wealth but not you." (Nnadoze, 1971) Scholars, like Obiechina and Newell, both point out that these pamphlets fail to fathom the socio-

economic issues which led to the rise of prostitution along with the increase in the number of cities in Nigeria.

Onitsha Market Literature also promoted the image of an 'ideal' woman, such as a 'good wife'. The narratives keep on har-bouring the virtues of an 'ideal wife' and stresses on how a sensible wife can prevent her home from becoming a squabble. But who is an 'ideal wife'? An 'ideal wife' is the one who is 'loyal to her man' and 'obedient to his commands." (Obodoechi, *An Ideal Wife to Marry*) Stephanie Newell cites that "most tension in the hegemonic masculine ideology clusters around the construction of the ideal woman." She terms this phenomenon as 'emphasised femininity.' According to her, 'emphasised femininity' is consciously promoted in mass media with a special insistence. Therefore, the image of the 'good wife' finds prevalence in the market literature. In fact, this 'emphasized femininity' almost became the 'key purpose' of Nigerian Market literature.

Although the objectification of women was dominant in the narratives of Onitsha Market literature the deviation of the same could also be found and Mrs. Chinwe Akosa's *A Woman's Pride Is Her Husband* (1962) is one such example. Like most of the Onitsha novelettes Akosa's narrative too revolves round the inculcation of the dictums of an ideal 'happy' marriage. The preface also claims that the author is a 'Nigerian married woman', whose exposure and experience in dealing with the 'difficult issues of marriage' has rendered her the 'credibility' of authorship.

A Woman's Pride Is Her Husband is divided in twelve sections. The first nine sections, like the other pamphlet narratives, highlights a specific moral, through the narration of an anecdote. Each of these sections culminates with a specific question and answer; a type of a narrative ploy to emphasize the moral. The last three sections of the pamphlets are on 'Advice'; 'ADVICE FOR SOME WOMEN WHO THINK, THAT FARMING WORK IS PUNISHMENT,' 'ADVICE TO ALL MEN' and 'ADVICE FOR YOUNG LADIES.' Although the last section of the pamphlet, 'ADVICE FOR YOUNG LADIES', is almost similar to Obodoechi's

An Ideal Wife to Marry, where he emphasises on how an 'ideal wife' should be 'loyal to her man and obedient to his commands' the narrative does not promote the negative projection of women. In the very first section of the narrative, 'OBEDIENCE IS A CHARM FOR MARRIAGE LIFE', Akosa emphasizes that a man can be wrong too; "Yes! some men are ready to blame their wives every time that there is discomfort within the family circle" (Akosa, 1962). Here the narrative highlights the fact that in a marital union only women should not be subjected to blame, the men too are responsible for the failure of marriage. This approach of Akosa is in opposition to the "emphasized femininity", which was the central theme in the pamphlet literature of Onitsha. Using different anecdotes, she has tried to validate the fact that success of marriage lies in the hand of both the partners, husband, and wife. Where authors, like Obo-dochi, state that a wife should always obey their husband, Akosa claims that a man can suffer for not listening to his wife. In the section, entitled "WHAT CAN I DO WITH A WOMAN'S DECISION?", Akosa narrates the story of Ejimke, who was haughty and disrespected his wife, Nkemakolam. He did not pay heed to her counsels. Due to this he became impoverished by gambling all his money. His son, Chidubem, on the other hand, was very sincere. His obedience to his mother made him prosper in his life. He secured a scholarship and went to study medicine, abroad. Akosa's narrative subverts the typical norms of Onitsha pamphlet literature. The narrative not only refrains from projecting the negative image of the women but also does not hesitate in accusing the men, if they are wrong. In the section on "The Unwise Couple" Akosa directly attacks the prevalent concept of 'male paranoia'. She commences this section on the note that though men are afraid to marry women, as they consider them as troublesome, it is quite imprudent to think so. According to her a relationship thrives on how "a man plays his card." To substantiate her claim she narrates the story of Udechuke and Nwaobiora and how Udechuke lamented for having paid a high bride price. On learning of her husband's misbehaviour Nwaobiora leaves him and spends the rest of her life as a spinster.

The character of Nwaobiara stands in sharp contrast to the image of women, conjured by most of the pamphlet narratives. Unlike the 'money grabbing' and 'deceptive' women characters of the contemporary male authors of *Akosa*, Nwaobiara could exert the choice to leave a relationship, which inflicted her self-respect. However, because of the failed marriage Nwaobiara received social condemnation. To highlight the fact how a man's role in marriage is extremely important *Akosa* states, "So now, it can easily be seen by every person and approved of, that a woman's pride is her husband. When a husband misbehaves, the wife gets ashamed and degraded. But when the husband lives up to expectation, the wife is proud, and she is right to do so."

In the next section, entitled „Do Women Know that Money is hard?“, *Akosa* questions the popular belief that women are only after money and to satisfy their claims men can go to any extent. To depict how pretense of men leads to deception she narrates the story of Joe and Cecilia, where the latter was tricked into marrying a man, burdened with debts. *Akosa* considers that the success of marriage is dependent on both husband and wife, where the husband should be the 'breadwinner' and the wife must fulfill the role of the 'care-taker'. However, if the wife lives in perpetual fear of the man of the house this balance is lost, leading to the general 'melancholy' of the family. (*Akosa*, 1962) Another very important section of this pamphlet is 'Happy Living.' Here, *Akosa* narrates the story of Okpaku, who was barren. Although she received the social banter for her condition her husband stood firm by her side. Many advised the couple to sever the relationship, so that they could move ahead, remarry and have children, their love and respect for each other, helped them to sustain their relationship. In due course of time Okpaku gave birth to twins. *Akosa's* deft approach to the issue of bareness is a response to the society, which hurled accusations on women for the inability to bear children.

In the section on 'Advice to All Men' *Akosa* emphasizes on the importance of being sympathetic and helpful to the wives. It is only in the last section of the pamphlet that *Akosa's* approach aligns with

the approach of her contemporary male writers, as she stresses on how women should be obedient to the men. Despite the conclusion, the narrative *A Woman's Pride Is Her Husband* (1962) has remained significantly different from the narratives of the male authors. Akosa tried to counter the popular notions about women, where they were repeatedly represented as negative. Throughout the narrative a third person omniscient narrator keeps on deploying the failure of men to secure a marital union. Akosa's *A Woman's Pride Is Her Husband* (1962) tried to alter the general perception of women, through the subversion of the popular misconception about women.

Akosa's literary approach finds a reflection in the narratives of Kano Market Literature. Around the 1970s another form of popular literature started making a mark in the urban areas of Kano, Sokoto, Katsina, Kaduna and Zaria. However, as Kano was the lead in the production of these texts the popular literature, produced during this period, came to be known as the Kano Market Literature. As a literary phenomenon, its aesthetics were similar to Onitsha chapbooks. The difference being, Onitsha literature was written predominantly in English, whereas Kano market literature was written in Hausa. Apart from language there was also another major difference between Kano and Onitsha Market literature. The authors of Kano market literature were mostly women.

The thematic approach of Kano market literature is quite like the 'chapbooks' of Onitsha. The novelettes of Kano market literature expressed concern about 'love' and 'marital relationships.' Hence, these novelettes were known as *Litattafan Soyayya* or the Book of Love. The Soyayya authors expressed social concerns through problematizing love and marital relationships. Besides this the authors also attempted to provide possible solutions to the problems concerning socio-cultural ruptures. However, Soyayyan literature has left a trail of controversy since its inception. It has earned the contempt of the society; in which it was located. Many critics have condemned Soyayya to be preoccupied with 'love' and 'marital relationships' and have disparaged the way purdah system,

coercive marriage and polygamy have been treated. The authors were allegedly criticized for misleading the youth, especially the women, as they were the major readers of Soyayyan. In fact, critics went to the extent of accusing this literary form as instrumental in promoting 'sexual promiscuity' and 'youthful disobedience' in 'conjugal relationships.' (Whitsitt, 2003) However, the authors assert that their main motive was to 'instill moral behavior'. To clarify their agendas most of the authors included a preface to their novelettes, which provided a thematic overview of the narrative, revealing the didactic elements of the novel. Authors expressed a degree of social responsibility in providing moral directions to youth, 'confused by volatile social climate.' (Whitsitt, 2003) Though both male and female authors address the problems of gender relations the works of the women authors provided a better insight to the social problems concerning women. The narratives of these female authors record the family politics, navigated by the women of the society. Some novelettes depict the politics of conservative families, preventing women's education and promoting coercive marriage, whereas others explore the psychological turmoil of women, caught in polygamous relationships. This approach is binary opposite to the pamphlets of Onitsha Market Literature.

However, in the works of the Hausa women authors an attempt to combat the social restraints can be identified. These authors have even tried to negotiate with the tensions, arising from religious traditions. They have tried to criticize forced marriage and polygamy and have regarded these practices as un-Islamic. Within the arena of Sharia or the official Islamic Law, the practice of *itjihad* prevails, which permits the followers of Islam to alter the rules of Sharia. Therefore, the Hausa women writers' critique of corrupt religious practices is not a criticism of Islam, rather an attempt to reform the society. Balaraba Ramat Yakubu is one such Soyayya writer who has attempted to extend social criticisms, by remaining within the purview of Islam. Her narratives espouse the welfare of women. She emphasized on the importance of education and how it would help in ameliorating the position of women in the society. In

the novelette, *Burdurwa Zuciya*, translated as *Young at Heart* (1987), she fiercely attacks the practice polygamy, regarding it the as the “the pastime of men who have shamelessly deviated from its religious application” (Whitsitt, 2003).

However, there were also Hausa women authors whose espoused ideals were completely in opposition to Yakubu. Bilkisu Ahmed Funtuwa, one of the most popular Soyayya writers, represents a conservative tone. She claims that marriage of coercion and polygamy are a part of ‘Hausa female’s living reality’, therefore through her narratives she tries to offer measures to cope with the complexities within the fold of polygamous relationships and problematic marital liaisons. According to her, women themselves are to be blamed for their ‘emotional misery’, which most often results from envy. Women can even be happy in a polygamous relationship if they devoutly follow religious precepts and are able to love their husbands. Although sharply different in approach Futunwa, like Yakubu, upholds the importance of education. In most of her narratives the protagonists are highly educated, with promising careers. *Ki Yaar da Ni* (1997 approx.) or *Agree With Me* explores the complexities of a polygamous relationship between Ismail, Aisha and Biba. Ismail and Aisha are happily married, each of them having lucrative jobs. Aisha undergoes nursing training and secures a job as a midwife. She excellently balances her household, consisting of four children and her job. However, her conjugal life is brought to a standstill when Ismail decides to remarry. Biba, the new wife, brings tumult to the peaceful household. She disrespects the senior wife and continuously plots and connives. This attitude, however, earns the contempt of Ismail, who eventually decides to divorce her. Biba undergoes a ‘self – evaluation and religious re-birth’ (Whitsitt, 2003). Aisha counsels Ismail to refrain from divorce, making him aware that it is considered as a ‘distaste’ in Islam. Ismail brings Biba back to the family; peace and order is restored once more to their household. *Ki Yaar da Ni* is almost like a dictum, providing guidance to cope with polygamy. In the course of the narrative when Aisha expresses her concern regarding Ismail’s

decision to remarry, one of Aisha's aunts reminds her to respect the Islamic practices. She addresses how polygamy is not just a custom but also right of men, sanctified by religion. Hence, Ismail becomes an embodiment of a responsible husband, despite taking the decision to remarry.

In another novelette, *Allura Cikin Ruwa* (1994) or Needle in Haystack Fatunwa explore *auren dole* or the concept of forced marriage. The protagonist Asiya falls in love with Aliyu, who father condemns the liaison as Asiya's father was a poor messenger. Asiya is married off to Aminu, a western educated neighbour, who initiates the marriage proposal to save her family from social disgrace. An extremely bereaved Asiya fails to accept the marriage initially, but Aminu's love and support gradually changes the dire situation.

Unlike Futunwa, Yakubu takes a very different stand. She categorically attacks *auren dole* or forced marriage as one of the 'cultural misunderstandings' of Islam. *Auren dole* has been the center of debate in the Islamic communities for a long time. According to the Islamic tenets marriage is considered as a liaison between the bride and groom. The consent of each is equally important. However, traditional practices have prevented women from negotiating the marriage completely by herself. Usually it is the father, who takes the decision on behalf of the bride. Whitsitt states, "Islamic law, practiced by the Hausa community, has distinguished in matters of marriage between a bakirah ('young unmarried girl') and a thayyibah ('a widow' or 'a divorcee'), stipulating that a bakirah is required to have an appointed guardian" (Whitsitt, 2003). The Qur'an does not prescribe the intervention of any guardian in the marriage negotiations on behalf of either an unmarried girl or a widow or divorcee. The intervention of wali ('ward') was a part of pre-Islamic practices, which later included in the larger corpus of Islam, in the Hausa community.

Although Yakubu's derision of polygamy and *auren dole* has invoked the contempt of the conservative scholars, it did not deter the author from composing a text like *Who Will Marry the Ignorant Woman* (1994 approx); a narrative revolving around the pro-

tagonist Zainabu, who transcends the social constraints, through the help of education. Yakubu regards education as the only possible resort to alter social oppression. The narrative emphasizes the function of education for the welfare of women. Zainabu's successful career enables her to liberate herself from any male security. Therefore, besides venting her condemnation of forced marriage and polygamy, Yakubu emphasizes the importance of education in altering the social oppressions.

Like Akosa, Yakubu and Fatunwa, tried to focus on the agency of women. However, Yakubu's approach is more radical than the other two women authors, mentioned in this paper. A comparative study of Kano and Onitsha Market literature deploys that in Kano market literature the women writers made prolific appearances and were given freedom to uphold and speak for the feminine agency and the fact that *A Woman's Pride Is Her Husband* (1962) is among a few preserved and recoded pamphlets, written by a woman author, shows the degree of marginalization which the women writers faced in Onitsha Market Literature.

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