

# Recurrent Themes in the Poetry of Yorùbá Female Writers

by

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## Abstract

This paper examines and discusses themes in Yorùbá poems written by women, and contends that the poems are topical socio-political commentary that at the time of publication pre-occupied Yorùbá society and Nigeria at large. Thus discussion will feature the recurrent themes of women, men, and the state of the nation via health, morality and religion to present women as serious literary artists who reflect on what is happening in the wider society and vivisect issues on women objectively without feminine sentiments. Second, the female poets in this study have enabled us to read the minds of women on various issues affecting women and humanity as a whole as they called on women to speak out to condemned the barbaric attitudes of some men towards women, and therefore have challenged men to take a critical look at their biased opinion of women and change their attitudes for the upliftment of society.

## Introduction

Toril Moi noted that as early as 1971 Elaine Showalter (as quoted by Register: 1975) called on critics to examine the works of female writers in order to have a deep knowledge of their arts (p. 50). Also, there is a need to re-enfranchise women writers into the mainstream of academic curriculum through a fairer, non-sex biased, and more judicious appraisals of their work. This is what this paper intends to achieve as it examines the themes of Yorùbá poems written by women and contend that the poems are essentially socio-political commentary which at the time of publication, pre-occupied Yorùbá society, and Nigeria at large.

Taking a broad look at Yorùbá studies in general, few women are featured among writers in Yorùbá language, and most especially in poetic writings. Nevertheless, this does not mean there are no thriving creative activities going on among Yorùbá women (many reasons may be adduced to this lacking). First, it may be due to the pre-occupation of womenfolk with domestic affairs. And secondly, the observation of Stimpson in Benstock (1987) has captured some of the rationale behind this when she says:

...men have controlled history, politics, and culture. They have decided who will have power and who will not; which realities will be represented and taught, and which will not. In so doing, men have relegated women, as women, to the margins of culture, if not to silence and invisibility (p. 2).

Although there are many African women writing in the English language medium, their writing in the Yorùbá language medium is not as prolific, hence they are generally prominent in Yorùbá oral poetry. Thus, the discussion in this paper will feature the following recurrent themes: women, men, and the state of the nation, health, morality and religion. Hence, I intend to examine these themes in the published poems of poets: Olúyémisí Adébòwálé in her two collections- *Ìgbà Lonígbàá Kà* and *Ewì Àtàtá* and Àrìnpé Adéjùmò in *Rò óo re*. The other poets, Oláníkẹ Rájí, Bólá Kóládé, Morííkẹ Àdigún, Tutù Oḍúnsì, Olúyemí Àkàndé have their poems in male edited texts titled *Wá Gbó* and *Àpérò Ewì*. And interestingly enough, the issue of gender in Yorùbá literary study has only become popular in the last decades via the works of scholars like Oyèşakin, Ilésanmí and Sheba.

## Wife, Mother, Caregiver and...

One of the favorite themes among female poets is about women as wife and mother and their importance which eulogizes women and their attributes in terms of their physical beauty, place in the family, hard work, and trustworthiness. Thus the poets analyze how society perceives women, and their overall importance in regards to the home, especially in childcare. And in this regard the poets appreciate the efforts of the mother on the child as Adéjùmò enumerates in 'Èrè lábò oja',

Iṣẹ iyá n sẹ lóri ọmọ ò sẹé rò  
Ká fòtò  
Ká fògbé  
Àisùn sṣise láisẹ *party* (p. 51).

(The efforts of the mother on the child  
cannot be enumerated  
Washing nappies  
Washing faeces...  
Keeping vigil while not attending a party)

In this case, the female poets admonish parents to lay good examples for their wards to follow as evident in Adébòwálé 'Wọn n wò yín' and Atééré loge', where indecent dressing by the females is condemned (*Igbà Lonígbàá Kà* pp. 25-27; 44-48).

Also, the danger in over-pampering the child is presented in the poem titled 'Bánkémọ' by Adébòwálé. She raises questions on the rationale for this and equally provides answers to the questions in the poems by pointing out that such mothers are only out to ruin their own future and the future of the child. Yet, her opinion and suggestions is that pampering and training should go together, and in the final construct, traditional practices of peer training and discipline for children should be adhered to in order to help the child. She thus says:

Àmọ bé ẹ kẹmọ tọmọ sèdin...  
Orí ara yín lẹ n bàjẹ  
Ayé ọmọ yín lẹ fí n tayò  
Bí wọn rẹni bọmọ yín wí  
Tẹ ẹ ní kí wọn senu ní  
gbólágún  
Pọmọ ó gbọn-ọn bọmọ dàgbà  
Kí ní pa ni tó jagò lọ ojàre

Èyin gbàgbé ni pé  
Èni kan níí bímọ  
Igba ẹni níí tọ ọ  
Ìbáwí ò pọmọ  
Orí ọmọ níí tún ẹ  
Ọmọ tá a kẹ láítọ níí múni  
kàbùkù  
Àmọ bẹ ẹ ti n kẹmọ  
Ló yẹ ẹ máa tọmọ  
(*Ewì Àtàtà* pp. 4-7).

(But if you over-pamper the  
child to a fault  
You are destroying your own  
future  
You are toying with the  
future of your child  
If you have someone to  
discipline your child  
And you say they should  
keep off  
That the child will become  
wise when he is older  
What kills more than  
foolishness?  
You have forgotten that  
Only one person gives birth  
to a child  
Many people look after him  
Disciplining does not kill the  
child  
It only moulds him into the  
right path  
It is only the over-pampered  
child that disgraces one  
As you pamper the child  
Make sure you train him.)

Here the poet notices the issue of breastfeeding and a campaign by various bodies in Nigeria to encourage women to breastfeed. And poets like Oláníke Raji enumerated its benefit which is like giving immunity to the child, enabling him or her to develop well and aid in quick recovery for the mother after childbirth (*Wá Gbó pp. 47-51*).

In juxtaposition, with childcare and modern women is drug abuse which Adébòwálé condemns the attitudes and actions as addressed in her poems which reports that toddlers are subjected to hardship via hair braiding when mothers give children drugs overdoses to ease the pain (*Ìgbà Lonígbàá Kà, pp. 20-22*). An abuse practiced in the day-care centers scattered throughout the society, a practice that can harm the future of females.

The poets also identify women's powers, typically physical and sexual powers. For example, in the poem 'Agbára yẹpẹrẹ àbí nílà?', Adébòwálé appreciates women physical power regarded as their effort in performing the functions of: taking care of the home, the husband, cooking, and child caring and so on, which only women can cope with effectively and efficiently in the society. Equally, sexual power is used by women to exercise power over men to assist in procreation and to make men emotionally and psychologically stable, thus Adébòwálé admonishes men to appreciate women rather than relegating them (*Ewì Àtátà pp. 48-50*).

Another topical issue raised in the poems by female poet concerns women experience in matrimony. In *Rò óo re*, Adéjùmò frowned at the practice of in-laws scolding the wife while the wife is not expected to reply. She is expected to address the in-laws by nicknames in order not to attract their anger. The modern women attitudes of committing abortion and throwing the child away are also condemned and seen as wickedness. The poets therefore advise such women to take caution and go for family planning methods in hospitals so as to avoid unwanted pregnancies that can lead to wicked acts (pp. 19-21).

Also, the poets in the treatment of women in marriage do not leave out the issue of widowhood and its problems in Yorùbá society wherein the death of the husband is a stage of castigation for the wife because she is accused of causing the death, and the in-laws in most cases go away with the belongings, leaving the wife with nothing which is linked to the problem of inheritance, and the practice of expecting one of the in-laws to inherit the widow in order to continue the family lineage. Understandingly, female poets are very skeptical about this practice, and thus advice women to beware of the deceit of men.

In general, all the poets express their surprise about the way society looks at women and treats her despite all her capacities, capabilities and limitations. Yet, they also religiously think that only God could reward women, and thus all urge women to speak out so they can stay free from unwarranted harassments. To this effect Adéjùmò says:

Àilèsòrò ní pilẹ ori burúkú  
Àimètò ẹnì a máa kóyà jẹ ni

(Inability to voice out is the  
foundation for ill-luck  
Unawareness of ones right  
leads to suffering.)

## Male Behavior Questioned

Another important theme in the poetry of female writers centers on men. Each of the poets gives treatise to men who neglect their responsibilities at home (*Ewì Àtàtá pp.56-60*) Thus, they all see the need for men to treat their wives well and stop forsaking them especially when things are not rosy. Instead men are admonished to repent from their bad ways and have total love for their wives, and requested to appreciate and praise women rather than condemning them.

According to Adébòwálé:

Gbogbo akọ tí bá ń jẹpo jiyò  
lóbẹ  
È má fẹnu ègàn pabo mó  
Gbogbo akọ tára rè gbé pépé  
Àní ó yẹ ẹ moyì abo  
(*Ewì Àtàtá p. 50*).  
All men that taste from the  
soup  
Should not damage the  
female personality  
All men that are active  
Should be able to appreciate  
the woman)

Also, both lazy men and uncaring fathers/husbands in the society were identified in the poems. While the poets condemn this attitude, they equally enjoin them to work and live up to expectations, and Adébòwálé says:

Akọ tí ójì lówúrò fowọ lẹrán  
Akọ tí ó jí lówúrò káwọ  
bọtan  
Akọ tí ò níşé à á şe  
Akọ tí ò lóko à á ro

Irú wọn yẹ lẹni à á sáátá...  
Bùkàtà ẹbí n bẹ nílẹ̀  
Wọn kò, wọn ò gbọ ọ ...  
Ìwọ akọ alápámáṣiṣé  
Yára tẹ̀rò araà rẹ pa bó ò fẹ̀ tẹ̀  
(*Ewì Àtàtà* pp.10-11)

(Men who wake up in the morning gazing  
Men who wake up in the morning doing nothing  
Men that have no work to do  
Men that have no farm to hoe  
Such should be castigated...  
Family responsibilities are there for them  
They refuse and neglected them...  
You lazy men  
You better have a re-think to avoid disgrace.)

Other behavioral traits of men were expounded in the poems as covetousness, and according Adébòwálé in 'Ìwà wọn ni' (It's their character) men are the most covetous among all animals, hence she says:

Èdá tó lójú kòkòrò tákọ ò sí  
Bí wọn láya sílé  
Abo tòde ni ó máa n dá wọn  
lọ̀rùn (*Ewì Àtàtà* p. 67)

(No creature is as covetous as men  
If they have wives at home  
They will be admiring the women outside)

Continuing, other vices of men are promiscuity arising from their inability to exercise self-control over their bodies, drunkenness, wandering and wife battering as the poets see men as more jealous and envious than women. Adéjùmò describes the situation as follows:

À á tí ẹ ọkọ  
Táya ẹ ọ gbodò  
kókùnrinkókùnrin  
Ìbàà jẹbí tàbí ojúlùmò ẹ?  
Èwo ni tọkọ  
Táya ẹ ọ gbodò kálájogbé  
Mo ráya tí ọ gbodò bákọ sòrò  
kàrè ọkọ...  
Bó bá dán an wò  
Ó di dandan kílẹ ó gbojikan  
Báya bẹgbé ròde ọràn  
Ọjòwúkùnrin a lé ténté bí ọdẹ  
A máa wọkọ tí yòò gbáya  
wálé...  
A wá lára obinrin lowú pin  
sí...  
Irọ n purọ fúnró...  
Owú tí n bẹ lára ako  
Kì í ẹgbẹ tabo (pp. 33-34).

(What do we do to a  
husband?  
Whose wife must not greet  
another man?  
Even if he is a relative or  
friend  
What of a husband  
Whose wife must not greet a  
neighbour  
I've seen a wife who must  
not talk to other men except  
the husband...



If she tries it  
 Problem starts  
 If the wife goes out with  
 friends  
 The jealous man will stay put  
 watching out  
 For the vehicle that will bring  
 the wife home.  
 Then we say the women are  
 very jealous  
 It's all lies...  
 The envy with a man  
 Is not comparable to that of  
 the woman.)

The issues raised in the above poems are examples of current problems in society, often causing separation and divorce in families. But above all, men are challenged in the poems to take a critical look at their biased opinions about women and change their attitudes. And with regards to wife battering, men who indulge in such acts are likened to the famous boxers (Mike Tyson and Mohammed Ali) as other men make laws that generally incapacitate women.

Indeed, the female poets are not deaf to the happenings in their environment. Adébòwálé condemns military rule and ushers in democracy with fanfare in her presentation. She reminds the military to go back to the barracks to perform the security role assigned to them instead of poke nosing into politics (*Igbà Lonígbàá Kà* pp. 28-29).

### **Plural Politics and Democracy**

With the introduction of plural politics and democracy in Nigeria, it becomes inevitable that poets should take it as one of their themes. In the tribulations of modern day politicians for power, poor behavior and negative attitudes have been added to the ethos of Nigeria. Thus, it is expressed as:

...òṣèlú òde-òní ò lè dánú rò  
 Wọn á Ẹ̀ra wọn méré̀ torí  
 àtẹ̀nujẹ̀  
 Ètò idàgbàsókè àwùjọ̀ ò jẹ̀  
 wọn lógún  
 Kí wọn jẹ̀gbẹ̀légbẹ̀ owó kó ló  
 mu wọn lómú  
 (*Ewì Àtátà* p. 25).

(...today's politicians cannot  
think deeply  
They attack each other  
because of food  
Developmental programme  
for the society is not their  
concern  
To steal plenty of money is  
their major pre-occupation)

In this section she admonishes older politicians to lay good examples for the new generation to follow, and that they should make haste to improve the lots of the people in the society.

And likewise, in the poem 'Eré orí igi', in regard to the general state of the nation, Adébòwálé blames the elders for the problems of the society. As she reveals:

Orin bó le wó kó wó  
Ti fẹ̀ẹkan gbenu àgbà kan  
Omọ́dé bórin òhún nilẹ̀ ni  
Ará iwájú lèwe n wò sáré  
Òwú iyá gbò sì lomọ́ ó ran  
(*Ewì Atàtà* p. 40).

('I-don't-care' attitude was  
the songs  
From the mouth of the elders  
Children grew to meet the  
songs  
The children are imitating the  
elders in their race  
The child spins the cotton  
gathered by the mother.)

### **Social Ills: Attitude, Police and Indifference**

Nigeria, especially the Yoruba society is nowadays decked by indiscipline, corruption and other unpatriotic attitudes. Everyone is putting on the lax attitude. Nobody is ready to make enough sacrifice for things to progress. Therefore, the poet in her anxiety ends the poem with a rhetorical question- 'Bó o lẹ̀la ó ẹ̀ se wá rí?'(p. 40). (How would the future be?)

Among the characteristic attitude of Nigerians inhibiting the progress of the country that the poets mention is both the inhuman and unruly behavior of the Nigeria policemen towards the students and the public at large. This attitude is strongly condemned by all the poets. It is a common practice for the police to behave irrationally when it comes to dealing with unarmed citizens. In fact, it is widely known that the Nigeria police and the Nigerian students' unions are sworn enemies. For any action, the students and their neighbors are tear-gassed, detained, brutalized or killed for no just reason. To confirm such act, a poet says:

Lọ́lọ́páá náà wá gbináḗ  
 À á ti í fi ni joyè àwòdi  
 Kéèyàn má tún le gbádiyè  
 Lọ́lọ́páá wá gboró  
 Wọn ò monílé yàtò sálejò  
 Wọn yin tajútajú títí  
 Wọn yin ín sógo wẹ̀wẹ̀  
 dánwò (*Ewì Àtátà* p. 63).

(Then the policemen became  
 mad  
 How can they account  
 For their inability to perform  
 Then the policemen grew  
 wild  
 Not able to differentiate the  
 landlords from the visitors  
 They tear-gassed severally  
 They even tear-gassed  
 children)

Other ills of the society are of major concern to the poets in their poems, thus I will review some of the major ills addressed by the poets:

- Adébòwálé speaks of bribery and corruption which are given various terms like '419', 'gbájúè'(slap his face), 'business', 'settlement' and ègúnjẹ within Nigeria context, in two poems titled 'Gbájúè' and 'Ègúnjẹ'. After giving a detailed explanation of the tricks and intrigues of the practice, she vehemently condemns this practice which is cancerous in the growth of the nation and tarnish the image of the country, and her citizenship among other nations (Ìgbà Lonígbàá Kà pp.39-43; 59).

- With the increase in the wages of workers in Nigeria, many people can now afford to own vehicles which have increase in the rate of accident in the country. Both Adéjùmò and Adébòwálé noticed this and trace the causes to careless driving or riding by both motorists and motorcyclists, and the illegal packing of vehicles. They therefore admonish the citizens to obey necessary traffic rules in order to avoid untimely death and casualties resulting from disobedience (*Rò óo re* pp. 10-12; *Ewì Àtátà* pp. 65-66).
- Another ill noticed in the society and addressed by the poets is the issue of frequent fire outbreaks in homes and government offices states in which fire consume properties and vital documents that can never be retrieved.
- She raises alarm on the trend of killing among cultists and advises students to face their studies not cultism that may appear in the educational system. According, the warning is:

Egbékégbé ní múnì ríkúkíkú he  
 Èyin akékòò ẹ kiyèsára  
 Ohun a bá wájà là á dojúko  
 (p.62).

(Bad gang leads to untimely  
 death  
 Students, be vigilant  
 Face your studies)

- The poet also critiques popular education for its sandwich and part-time courses that hinder student learning as some disrupt the learning process in jam-packed but not fully comprehended lectures (*Ìgbà Lonígbàá Kà* pp.51-53).
- The poets critique scarcity of essential products in a nation harvesting them as poets discuss the inability of the rulers to provide enough petroleum products for the use of the citizens which often leads to increase prices and the suffering of more people. But the only solution they proffer is for all to beg the government to make the products available! (*Ìgbà Lonígbàá Kà* pp.66-70; *Àpérò Ewì* pp. 34-36).

Leaving little room for one to escape social responsibility, our poets also examine the dictum of ‘health is wealth’ as two poets deconstruct baby formula in favor of breastfeeding. Hence in *Wá Gbó*, Rájí enjoins all nursing mothers to give breast milk to their children, and condemns the practice of giving baby formulas to children. And according to the poet, breastfeeding has a number of advantages for both the mother and the child and also the society.

These advantages include providing good immunity, aiding proper growth and development, aiding quick recovery for the mother after child delivery and providing the society with good citizens. Hence, in-part of her poem says:

Gbogbo èyí mo rò pò  
Pé ká bára wa sọ òkodoro ọ̀rọ̀  
Pé táa báá bímọ́ tán  
Ká rọ́jú ká fomi ọ́mú tiwa  
fọ́mọ  
Ká ma gbékẹ̀lé wàrà  
màálùù...  
Ìyá ikókó tí ò jẹ kọ́mọ rẹ  
ráhùn ọyàn  
Abé irú wọ́n kì í pé jinná  
Àrùn húgẹ̀hùgẹ̀ a sì gbókèrèrè  
worú wọ́n  
Ọmọ a fún lóyàn a dàgbà  
wéréwéré  
Alukutu-bọ́nbọ́ nírú wọ́n jẹ  
lávùjọ ọ́mọ wẹ̀rẹ  
(pp. 47-51)

(All these I consider  
That we should tell each  
other the truth  
That after giving birth  
We should endeavour to  
breastfeed our children  
We should not rely on cow's  
milk...  
The nursing mother whose  
child is not thirsty of breast  
milk  
Her vagina heals quickly  
All ailments will not affect  
them  
A child that is breastfed will  
develop quickly  
They become bouncing  
babies among their peers)

In regards to the deadly disease of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), Adébòwálé provides an educative treatise as she enumerates the causes, signs and symptoms of the killer disease which include using un-sterilized needles, contact with a carrier's blood, sexual intercourse with infected persons et cetera. Thus, she sees AIDS as a punishment for promiscuity and warns the people, both young and old on the helplessness of the orthodox medicine in effecting a total treatment, and equally gives remedies to its devastation as sexual abstinence and using sterilized needles for any cut on the body. And last, she laments on the sorrowful state that both the victim and his/her predicament and advises that all should pray to God to help eradicate the disease (*Wá Gbó* pp. 102-104).

As could be read through all the themes in their poems, female poets admonish readers on the need to believe in God, worship and praise Him all the time. Adébòwálé and Adéjùmò were able to enlighten readers on the need to identify fake and false ministers/saviors from the genuine and true ones. And according to Adéjùmò

...àwọn aṣojú tòótó n bẹ ní  
 sàà yí  
 Wọn pò bí ewé rúmò  
 Bójísé tòótó tí wá pò tó  
 Àwọn òjísé èké nàà ò ṣàipò...  
 Ọ̀pò òjísé èké tí n bẹ nílẹ̀ yí  
 Tí fẹ̀tàn tútù bayé abo jẹ  
 (p.35)

(...There are good  
 representatives in this period  
 They are as many as the  
 leaves on a tree  
 As the genuine ministers are  
 many  
 So also are the fake ones...  
 Many of the fake ministers in  
 this country  
 Have use deceit to spoil the  
 personality of the female.)

Therefore there is need for all to trust God and believe not what human beings say; and believers need to be cautious because some happenings are some of the signs of the end-time. Hence they preach the Christian doctrine of belief in a heavenly home, a point where they are metaphorically saying via poems that the world is like a market where people go to buy and sell or a farm where one goes to work, but at the end of the day people return to their various homes which is a heaven. Thus she says:

Ayé kì í ṣebi à á gbé sí  
Bá a rojà láàárò à á darí wálé  
Ojà layé èdá  
Òrun nilé gbogbo wa  
(*Ewì Atàtà* p. 22).

(The world is not one to live  
in forever  
If we go to the market in the  
morning,  
we must come back home  
The world is man's market  
Heaven is everybody's home.

Hence, she implores everyone to think of the end, and of the heavenly home in all his or her actions in this world.

On the issue of moral, the female poets as mothers did not miss words on the need for parents to be good examples for their children to follow. They condemned untruthfulness by elders and stress the need for the young to respect elders and take to their words. Also, the theme of 'let the young grow' occupies their poems and they advised the adults not to pull the young ones down. Therefore, they implore everybody to behave well in any position they find themselves, be it masters, servants, writers, children, parents, judges or politicians. And they also advised that we should not copy or imitate others doing bad for this can lead to wickedness. Thus Adébòwálé says:

Èní bá forí wórí  
Ètẹ́ a máa kángun sí wọn  
Èni bá ṣàfarawé  
Àbùkù ní kàn gbẹ̀yìn  
(*Ewì Atàtà* p.3).

(One who imitates  
Will be disgraced  
One who copies  
Will be discredited at the  
end.)

Conversantly, Olúyemí Akàndé in *Àpérò Ewì* commented on the evils of modernization, wherein she says that so-called ‘civilization’ has turned everything upside down to the extent that we no longer cherish our age long tradition of giving respect to all who are due for respect, because adultery, fornication and abortion are witnessed everyday, and even our dressing code has changed for the worse.

In conclusion, despite the above observations, the few Yorùbá female poets in this paper have started a good process, they have been able to reflect and comment on what is happening in the wider society; they have enable us to read the minds of women on various issues affecting themselves in contrast to what is expressed in poems written by men. And above all, their poems have succeeded in exposing contradictions, and have stimulated some men to abolish negative practices.

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