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Transitioning from the Margins to the Spotlight: A study of Emily Oghale God's Presence *Beyond the Boundaries*

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Abstract

This study examines how Emily Oghale God's Presence portrays the place of women in politics and leadership in her creative work. The political landscape in Nigeria is predominantly controlled by men and women seldom assume prominent roles. Achieving gender equality, especially in the realm of politics, poses a significant challenge. The prevalent perception is that women are typically viewed as supporters in politics rather than active participants, thereby relegating women to the background. This form of oppression against women is as a result of the cultural stereotypes dictating that women should occupy supportive roles rather than taking on leadership and decision-making positions. Consequently, engaging in politics or aspiring for political positions is often socially unacceptable for women. Drawing upon womanist theory, this study contends that women can only overcome stereotypes and attain influence by collectively striving for power and advocating for equality, rather than passively waiting for power to be bestowed upon them. Emily Oghale God's Presence envisions Nigerian women as integral participants in the political mainstream, challenging the cultural stereotypes. Therefore, this study recommends that education and economic empowerment are viable means, through which women can attain equality and liberation from the restrictions imposed upon them by the society.

Keywords: *Womanism, Gender equality, Empowerment Patriarchy and Politics.*

Introduction

Since the time of colonial rule, the persistent discrimination of women has remained a defining characteristic of Nigeria's patriarchal political structure. Numerous historical and sociocultural factors have contributed to the persistent gender inequality in Nigeria political system. To understand the causes of gender inequality, it is crucial to delve into the historical context of Nigeria. The colonial era exemplifies a deliberate effort by men to relegate women to a subordinate, private sphere, despite societal

advancements through education. Irobi (2007) accurately contends that "modern society, stemming from colonization, further complicates the oppression and subjugation of African women" (p.60). Similarly, Esew (2003) observes that:

The privileging of men by the colonial administration and marginalization of women empowered men to the detriment of women from the political space in Nigeria.

The colonial administration simply swept aside previous female political structures in the society, replacing them with completely male structures and positions. Their masculinity policies gradually eroded the spaces women once occupied during the pre-colonial era and enabled men to subvert the political system (p. 23).

The colonial system favored men, focusing on their political and economic empowerment at the expense of women, who consequently found themselves marginalized. Even when women gained access to education, it was often limited to roles such as nursing and teaching, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Western education, empowering men over women, played a pivotal role in the leadership positions men assumed during both colonial and post-independence politics. As a result, men reaped the benefits of education, power, and elevated social status, while women remained relegated to subordinate roles. Providing women with equal opportunities, particularly in the realm of politics, remains a significant challenge. They are frequently viewed as figures who inspire political movements rather than active competitors. Modupe, Bamidele, Olakunle, Olubukoye and Ake (2019) say that “The whole essence of encouraging women to dance is to distract their attention from power and to keep them perpetually in subordinate position. They seem to forget that, it is a woman’s fundamental right to participate in governance” (p.35). In other words, the level of female assertiveness in the political arena is understated.

Despite shifts in the political landscape as it concerns women's involvement in politics, the typical Nigerian woman continues to experience marginalization in the political sphere. Women are seen as being incapable of running for and securing positions in the political process. Gbadamosi (2012) says that “The marginalization of Nigerian women in politics and decision making is as old as the Nigerian society and actually predates the advent of colonialism in Southern and Northern Nigeria” (p.1). As a result of this, ensuring equal opportunities for women, particularly in politics, poses a significant challenge. Women are frequently regarded as supporters in politics rather than active competitors. In essence, the assertiveness of women in the political space is underestimated. This circumstance is perpetuated by a lot of factors, which also includes a lack of awareness among Nigerian women regarding their political rights. According to Odey and Onekutu (2003):

In the past, the pre – colonial and many years after independence, the Nigerian woman had very little or no political awareness. Even though women in the south of the country had voting rights by the 1950s, it was during Alhaji Shehu Shagari’s regime as Nigerian President in the late eighties that women in the north were granted voting rights for the first time. It was an eye opener for women and they formed leagues at national level to educate women on their voting rights, procedures, political rights and other electoral issues. (p. 29)

Consequently, the encouragement for women to pursue political positions or engage in politics was not prevalent until recently. In Nigeria, the prevailing patriarchal ideology, which views women as inherently or biologically inferior to men, permeates all aspects of life. This belief determines the socially acceptable roles for both women and men. Active involvement in politics is thus regarded as an exclusive domain for men, as leadership roles are traditionally assigned to men who are deemed physically stronger and mentally equipped to lead. Okpe (2002) says that:

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The subjugation of women is pervasive across various communities and ethnic groups in Nigeria, where women are perceived as mere extensions of men, occupying a subservient status. Traditional institutions strongly reinforce gender differences, seeing women as inconsequential, the “insignificant other.” This stereotypical view of women, to a large extent, influences the mindset of women, who often internalize and accept this position. Any effort to challenge this norm is met with resistance, with such women being seen as competing with men or trying to disrupt the natural order of things. Consequently, they are frequently labeled as stubborn, out of control, or ill-mannered.

This study focuses on the female protagonist in Emily Oghale God's Presence *Beyond the Boundaries*, Afokeoghene, whose story reflects the transformative power of education and determination. Against the backdrop of prevailing societal norms that confine individuals to predefined roles and expectations, the play of Emily Oghale God's Presence unfolds as a beacon of hope and empowerment. In the world of the play, it is apparent that Afokeoghene’s journey is emblematic of a broader societal paradigm. Many individuals, particularly women, find themselves relegated to the peripheries of influence, where traditional norms dictate limited roles and opportunities. However, Emily's story challenges this status quo, offering a unique perspective on how one can navigate the complexities of societal expectations and emerge as a catalyst for change.

This study explores the socio-cultural and religious dimensions that contribute to the marginalization of women, and how figures like Afokeoghene navigate these challenges to bring about transformative shifts. By examining the broader context of societal expectations and the role of determination in shaping individual trajectories, this study explores the mechanisms that enable individuals to transition from the margins to the spotlight, breaking free from the boundaries that constrain their potential. Through an in-depth exploration of Afokeoghene's story, this study not only sheds light on her personal experiences but also offers valuable insights into the broader dynamics of societal change, empowerment, and the intersection of determination and resilience.

Obstacles militating against Women Political Participation

In their pursuit of political empowerment and involvement, Nigerian women encounter a convergence of interconnected challenges. In this study, certain challenges that women encounter, which act as obstacles in their pursuit of political participation and advancement is critically scrutinized. Throughout the nation, cultural biases against women persist. Patriarchal norms and traditions that favor men have consistently hindered the active involvement and rise of women in political leadership roles. Cultural biases, supported by aspects such as religion, myths,

norms, values, education, and the socialization process—all shaped by patriarchal structures—have collectively portrayed women in stereotypical roles, labeling them as the "weaker sex" and confining them to the domestic and non-political "private sphere." This perception, along with low-paying jobs, significantly impacts women's access to power and influence in decision-making across various societal levels, including the political sphere.

In nearly all parts of Nigeria, despite women holding crucial roles in religion and the economy, their representation as traditional or political leaders remain uncommon. The patriarchal nature of the society further infringes upon women's property and economic rights, with approximately 90% of land and property ownership, essential for meaningful participation in politics, concentrated in the hands of men. The existing traditional and cultural norms in various parts of the country obstruct the engagement, growth, development, and rise of women in political leadership. This cultural backdrop presents a challenging environment for women, where the prevailing perception of women in traditional and non-political capacities remains dominant. According to Oluajo (2003):

Male-favoured values and tradition have continued to work against the participation and emergence of women as political leaders. Cultural prejudices against women reinforced by religion, myths, norms, values, education and the process of socialization all the creation of patriarchy have all combined to picture women stereotypically as the "weaker sex", "working mothers" saddled with procreation and confined to the domestic and apolitical "private sphere" and low paid jobs which greatly affects the share of power and influence of women on decision making at all levels of society including the political sphere. In virtually all parts of Nigeria, while women play very important religious and economic roles, women as traditional political leaders are the exception rather than the norm. The patriarchal nature of the society abuses women property and economic rights such that it is estimated that 90% of ownership of land and properties and hence the material base with which to venture into and participate as major stakeholders in politics is the preserve of men (p.8).

Religious fundamentalism provides patriarchal and paternalistic interpretations of the suitable roles for women, significantly limiting their involvement in the political sphere. Agbalajobi (2010) says that "some religious doctrines militate against the active participation of women in politics and position of authority" (p.80) For example, Islamic doctrines rigorously prohibit women from engaging in certain political activities, such as public speaking, that could enable them to pursue their political aspirations. Similar instances of entrenched patriarchy can also be found in Judeo-Christian religions, collectively emphasizing the notion that women should be submissive and "obedient" to men in all aspects, including politics and decision-making, both in private and public domains.

The historical discrimination faced by women has placed them in an economic disadvantaged position. Successful political campaigns demand significant financial support and can be costly. According to Agbalajobi (2010):

Over the years, sexual division of labour and job opportunities offered on sex basis has given men productive gender roles, enabling them to possess more

purchasing power over their female counterparts. As an implication, the Nigerian labour market has about 75% of labour being supplied by men. This economic disparity favour men to the disadvantage of women. Only few women that are affluent possess the economic power to bankroll political campaigns (pp.78-79)

The societal perception that political engagement is inherently masculine exacerbates the issue, as backers and sponsors tend to favor male candidates under the assumption of higher success rates. Women in politics have found success predominantly through support from women's movements, both financially and otherwise. The financial reliance of women on men, evident in the financial dependence of wives on their husbands in families, highlights the significant financial limitations women face in Nigerian politics. Consequently, the lack of a strong financial foundation severely impedes women's political aspirations.

Political life has traditionally been dominated by men, creating an environment that is not inherently favorable to women. The organization of this political sphere follows male norms, values, rules, and standards, establishing a system that inherently disadvantages women. In many developing nations, including Nigeria, Ake's concept of the "non-autonomization or limited autonomization" of the state contributes to an overvaluation of power. The security of the dominant class relies heavily on accumulating more power, turning politics into a metaphorical battlefield characterized by a normless and extremist pattern of political competition.

The pursuit of power in this context is intense, with an exceptionally high premium placed on it. Recent elections in Nigeria highlight a shift in political dynamics where, despite claims to the contrary, the reliance on argument has transformed into a reliance on force. The language of politics has evolved, and the organizational structure resembles warring armies. In a society structured in this way, differences become formidable, and the scope for cooperation is severely limited.

These factors collectively contribute to the perception of politics as "Hobbesian," reflecting a state of constant conflict and competition. Additionally, the prevalent belief in politics as "dirty" and synonymous with election rigging, bribery, corruption, violence, and political killings, particularly in Nigeria, further erodes confidence in women's ability to engage with the political process. Consequently, many women tend to distance themselves from politics altogether, reinforcing the gendered perception that politics is primarily a male enterprise.

While women are recognized for their significant contributions to campaign efforts and the mobilization of support for political parties, their presence in decision-making bodies within these parties is typically limited. According to Oluajo (2003):

In Nigeria of the 30 political parties, there is none with a female leader, while just 11 percent of party leaders in the world are women. The dominance of men in vital and important party decision-making organs of parties has often led to biases against women in the selection, nomination and emergence candidates into political leadership positions. More often than not "male characteristics" are emphasized as the criteria in the selection and emergence of parties' candidates or leaders. These prejudices against women in the process of emergence of political leadership of parties inhibit

women from integrating into party's work and hinder women's active participation and progress in political leadership positions (pp. 11-12).

For the minority of women who manage to overcome the challenges posed by male dominance in the party candidate selection process, they face an additional hurdle – the commercialization of politics and the electoral system. The recent general elections in Nigeria vividly demonstrate that running for elective public office demands substantial financial resources. Consequently, only individuals with significant wealth or those connected to public funds, either directly or through intermediaries, can gather the substantial financial backing necessary. Therefore, due to the limited financial resources and restricted access to economic decision-making, for most women, especially among those keen on actively engaging in politics, they find it challenging to financially support their aspirations to run for public office. In a political environment like Nigeria's, characterized by a zero-sum game, where political parties resemble stock exchanges and influential individuals with significant financial resources determine the allocation of political offices, the concept of equal opportunities for women in representation and political leadership is often overlooked by most political parties.

In recent times, various initiatives have emerged aimed at advancing the commitment to bring about personal and social changes for women, particularly in their roles in public life. By conducting numerous women enlightenment programs within women's movements, the level of women's subordination in politics has been diminished to some extent.

Theoretical Framework

Womanism, originates precisely from the creative writings of Alice Walker, an American novelist and poet who through her writings subsequently became a prominent voice in black feminist movements. The theory of womanism was appropriated by African feminists because of the suitability of its feminist ideological conceptions to the African feminist Agenda. Okereke (1986) says that:

African feminism cherishes what is good in tradition but rejects that which diminishes the woman as an individual and as part of the society. In this feminism, motherhood, companionship, mutual growth and interdependence of man and woman in marriage are cherished, but polygamy, male dominance, sexism and patriarchal definition of women are rejected...(p.13).

Okereke (1986) clearly synthesizes the tenets of womanism as a branch of African feminism and shows its tilt towards liberal feminism that dwells on the exploration of the status of women in the society rather than bastardization of womanhood. Hence, womanism becomes a platform for the exploration of equality of the sexes through deconstruction of cultural practices that breed gender superiority complexes. According to Ogunyemi (1988) "Womanism is black-centred, it is accommodationist...it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men will change from their sexist stand. This ideological position explains why women writers do not end their plots with feminist victories" (p.5)

Furthermore, womanism places a strong emphasis on community, spirituality, and the collective strength of women. This study, resonates with the womanist perspective, highlighting the spiritual dimensions of women's lives and their capacity to draw strength

from their cultural and communal ties. The women in the play, as they navigate their journeys, embody the communal aspect of womanism, showcasing the importance of solidarity and mutual support.

The womanist theoretical framework also aligns with the narrative's exploration of agency and empowerment. Womanism emphasizes the agency of women in defining their experiences and shaping their narratives. In Emily Oghale God's Presence *Beyond the Boundaries*, female characters actively participate in their own liberation, challenging oppressive norms and reshaping their destinies. The framework acknowledges the importance of agency in the face of systemic challenges and celebrates the strength and resilience of women.

In conclusion, womanism provides a robust theoretical lens for this study. By embracing this theory, this study aims to demonstrate that women are not inherently unpredictable or unstable in their pursuit of recognition. Instead, they are seeking a more inclusive environment—one that provides them with the opportunity to fulfill their potential and, in doing so, actively contribute to the process of nation-building. By incorporating the dimensions of race, spirituality, and community, womanism enriches the analysis, offering a more inclusive understanding of the experiences of women transitioning from the margins to the spotlight. It allows for a holistic exploration of the complexities of women's lives, acknowledging their agency, resilience, and the interconnected nature of their struggles.

Altering the Political Terrain in Emily Oghale God's presence *Beyond the Boundaries*

The play, *Beyond the Boundaries* centers on the resolute endeavors of the female protagonist, Afokeoghene, who seeks the position of President-General for the Ewhokporkpor community within the Isoko Ethnic nationality. Her political opponent is Chief Obaro, a potential candidate representing the Good Life Party. The play is set in the rural village of Ewhokporkpor in contemporary Nigeria. The main source of conflict within the play stems from Chief Obaro's inclination to eschew issue-based political campaigns and instead employ a patriarchal approach. Chief Obaro mobilizes men by appealing to their emotions, asserting that politics is exclusively reserved for men. Chief Obaro's approach, in essence, prioritizes traditional gender roles in politics rather than focusing on policy-based campaigns. He says "Politics is like a bamboo forest, only a strong and shrewd men wrestle in it" (p.37). Adhering to the patriarchal belief that politics is a game reserved exclusively for men, women are advised to abstain from involvement in this realm. Unfortunately, Afokeoghene decides to challenge the prevailing male authority by running for the position of President-General of the Ewhokporkpor ethnic nationality, a move prompted by Chief Obaro's patriarchal strategy. Since Chief Obaro decides to adopt this patriarchal approach, Afokeoghene has no alternative but to build her campaign by rallying the women of Ewhokporkpor community.

Chief Obaro sees politics solely as a means to acquire and retain power. Emily Oghale God's Presence captures a society languishing in the hands of its real enemies in their various capacities as rulers, leaders, opinion leaders, advisers: the likes of the Chief Obaro. It is apparent in the play that his prejudiced stance hampers progress in Africa. According to him, "man is politics; he is the symbol of power and authority" (p.6). The swagger surrounding Chief Obaro contributes to the portrayal of a world

steeped in male chauvinism. He dominates the political landscape like a formidable giant and the outcome of male dominance in politics translates into the subordinate role assigned to women in society. Women are seen as diminutive figures completely confined to domesticity. No wonder Akaenyi (2024) says that "...women in African society continue to be subjected to mistreatment, marginalization, oppression and intimidation by men" (p.156). In the face of Chief Obaro's sexism, the playwright emphasizes the need for women to regain freedom through political consciousness. Afokeoghene boldly resist oppression in its various forms. She grapples with breaking free from the oppressive norms, customs and traditions of her community. As a modern and educated woman, she is determined to liberate herself from societal constraints. Emily Oghale God's Presence considers her a strong female character, essential in contemporary African drama. Afokeoghene's education becomes a powerful tool enabling her to overcome limitations and challenges in a male-dominated society. Her education not only leads to financial independence but also empowers her to assert her rights, voice her aspirations, and resist oppression. Afokeoghene represents educated women capable of earning their own income, and participating in equal relationships with men, where love, respect, and opinions are significant. Emily Oghale God's presence's portrayal highlights education as a reliable avenue for female empowerment, challenging cultural and religious norms that constrain women. The play condemns cultural prejudices against women, particularly ancient tradition which negates women's rights and impedes their freedom. Afokeoghene symbolizes subjugated women and children in a male-dominated society.

The female characters in *Beyond the Boundaries* calls for a reform of traditions and customs. Here, the writer stresses the need for a change from sexist mindset, which is essential for societal development. Emily Oghale God's presence goes beyond raising awareness about the plight of women. She advocates for a confrontational approach against patriarchy and emphasizes the need for collective action by women to end discriminatory practices. As the election campaign grow more intense, Afokeoghene's impassioned speeches begin to heighten women's social consciousness. This led to their decision to organize a protest march to the local government headquarters, with the goal of extending maternity leave from three to six months. Furthermore, some of the more progressive voices among the full-time housewives advocate for compensation for their roles in childbearing, child-rearing, and family support.

In his desperation, Chief Obaro tries to exert influence over Afokeoghene by summoning her husband, Felix Oliseh Nnamdi, before the Council of Elders. The goal is to pressure him into convincing his wife to withdraw from the election. When this strategy fails, Chief Obaro turns to Akpome, who is Afokeoghene's ex lover, in an attempt to rekindle their emotional feeling for each other. Then take advantage of the opportunity to dissuade her from pursuing the ambition of becoming the next President-General of Ewhokpokpor. Chief Obaro's plan of using sexual blackmail prove unsuccessful.

Frustrated, Chief Obaro and Akpome resorts to kidnapping Erezi, Afokeoghene's eldest daughter. The conspirators invokes the anger of Oletu Emanuzo, who issued an ultimatum for the girl's release. The community's youth mobilizes to search for Erezi, ultimately capturing the kidnappers, who confessed to being hired by Chief Obaro.

On the day of the election, Chief Obaro suffers a humiliating defeat at the hands of Afokeoghene. Overwhelmed by shame and unable to accept being governed by a woman, he tragically took his own life. Furthermore, his primary financial supporter and political mentor, Senator Emamode, succumbs to a heart attack. The play concludes with the positive outcome of a matriarchal society coming into prominence.

The female characters in this play embrace a more traditional and communal way of life, with a lesser influence of modernity compared to urban areas. Consequently, the women of Ewhokpokpor draw upon their traditional culture to resist the oppression they face due to their gender. They maintain a strong sense of female identity and have a deep understanding of the social roles and expectations placed upon them as women.

In traditional African society, direct political power for women was uncommon, but Ewhokpokpor women found subtle ways to express their opinions and exert influence, especially in matters that directly affect their lives. These women's groups are committed to the cause of advocating for women's rights, and they hold significant sway over men and decision-making processes. At the beginning of the play, these women are preparing for a bold protest due to a discriminatory judgment against Emuobo, a woman who had recently lost her husband. In what is considered as a departure from the customary practices of Ewhokpokpor, Emuobo becomes pregnant just three months after her husband's passing. Rather than holding Chief Azino accountable for his involvement with her and the subsequent pregnancy, Emuobo finds herself subjected to an unjust trial. To make matters even more complicated, Chief Azino, a member of the Council of Chiefs, is shielded from repercussions, leaving Emuobo without an advocate during her trial. Despite Oletu's warning that the menfolk should desist from the discriminatory trial of Emuobo and blame Chief Azino for violating the tradition of the community, men like Chief Obaro maintains their sexist principles and bias against women, thereby fueling crisis in gender relations:

CHIEF OBARO: The blame is theirs, not ours, can't you see? It's the woman who broke tradition by not keeping the sanctity of widowhood for at least six months as tradition demands. (*The women react occasionally to the men's discussion*)

OLETU: What about Azino who is a Chief and one of us. He is supposed to be a custodian of our tradition. If he has eyes on Emuobo, couldn't he have kept the sanctity of the dead for at least three more months? For the moment, he could have just helped play the patron by overseeing the welfare of her children, while time elapsed (p. 10)

The evident bias in this treatment angers the women, prompting them to stage a protest against this injustice at Chief Emamuzo's palace, where he serves as the Oletu of Ewhokpokpor. Afokeoghene and Queen Erumena quickly rally the women together, and after carefully considering the potential repercussions of a women's uprising, Queen Erumena ultimately decides to grant clemency to Emuobo.

Afokeoghene is a womanist. She outrightly condemns the cultural practice of resorting to nudity as the ultimate means of addressing injustice perpetrated against them. She says:

AFOKE: I know the cultural practice of going nude as

the last and most potent weapon to invoke curses and the wrath of our ancestors any form of injustice done to us. Be it as it may, it demeans womanhood; besides, those who constitute the council elders are our husbands, brothers and sons. We should not invoke the wrath of the gods, upon our land, Ivie! (Please). I beg of you, we should not add sentiment to sensibility. (*To the women leader*), Could you please speak to your women? (p.1).

This tendency of going nude as an attempt to address injustice against women is always seen as an irrational act by the patriarchal society. Therefore, through female bonding, the women of Ewhokporokpor community make their grievances known, without exposing their bodies. At the end of the play, what the spectators witness is a celebration of the strength of womanhood, rather than a confirmation of societal misconceptions regarding women.

Conclusion

In exploring the thematic landscape of this study, it becomes evident that the work delves into the nuanced dynamics of women's empowerment and liberation. Emily Oghale skillfully navigates the play to illuminate the transformative journey of her female character from societal peripheries to the center stage. This study has unfolded a tapestry where women, once confined by oppressive traditions and cultural norms, navigate their way to emancipation. The heroine, emblematic of real-life struggles, signify the broader feminist discourse, emphasizing the importance of agency, education, and collective action.

It is obvious that the play is more than a literary creation; it is a feminist manifesto. It calls for a reevaluation of social structures that marginalize women, echoing the need for dismantling entrenched biases. The play echo the universal quest for gender equality, challenging stereotypes and advocating for women's rightful place in society. Therefore, it is evident that God's Presence *Beyond the Boundaries* only portrays the journey of individual female characters but also stands as a mirror reflecting the collective struggle of women transitioning from the margins to the spotlight. The playwright beckons us to question and challenge the status quo, envisioning a future where women stand on equal footing with men, their presence acknowledged and celebrated beyond socio-cultural constraints. Emily Oghale's play, through its nuanced storytelling, prompts us to recognize the power dynamics at play, urging us to actively participate in the ongoing dialogue surrounding gender equality and women's empowerment.

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