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Abstract

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Deconstructing the Female Quest in Nigerian Cartoons

Johnson Olarinde Oladesu, PhD¹, John Out, PhD²

Afolabi, Benjamin Eni-itan Fisayo, PhD³

Oluwagbenga Peter Odewole, PhD⁴, Adebayo Adelaye Abiodun, PhD⁵

In an attempt to present an issue of topical interest, an author of a text or imagery is expected to depict two voices. The first voice, could be that is the antagonist that is given to negativity and vice, while, the other voice must be given to correction that is aimed ameliorating a dwindling situation. The cartoonist's work under study presents a biased view of the female identity such that there is a male-centred negative perception of the female character used in driving the story he has written. This study challenges this stereotyping at a time that several scholars continue to call for a balanced presentation of the female identity. The female identity as presented in the works of other mostly male cartoonists is weighted against the works Nd'Usoro whose work is the subject of discussion. The work of a female cartoonist that has used a female character to advance a positive female stereotype is presented to set the tone for the article. It also brings to bare the works of authors of African literature and the pertinent issues raised in favour of the female gender as a textual parallel to the thrust of the article.

THE CARTOONING ART form in Nigeria has grown to find a prominent place on the pages of newspapers and magazines. Though scholars also delve into studying a growing variety of epistemic nuances in cartoons, this paper is not aware of any tertiary institutions that offer courses in cartooning in Nigeria. Patriarchy in Nigeria, and in most parts

1 Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University Ago-Iwoye, Email : jo.oladesu@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng

2 Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Federal College of Education Zaria Email : ozovehe@gmail.com

3 Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University Ago-Iwoye, Email : afolabi.benjamin@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng

4 Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University Ago-Iwoye, Email : odewole.peter@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng

5 Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University Ago-Iwoye, Email : adelaye.adebayo@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng

of the world has narrowed the space and reduced the voice of the female for centuries, such that the male personae is often used set the experiential parameter for the female. What makes this subject matter on the female stand out in this regard is the male point of view that is persistently biased in its perception of the female identity. Igbolo and Ejue (2016:126) posit that “There is no doubt that societal recognition of the value of education has been displaced, paving the way for ignorance and the people’s deplorable condition and education, particularly the girl-child”. A nation such as Nigeria should therefore continue to legislate for all agencies to continue to tame every patriarchal inclination so as to make equitable space for the female gender.

The act and the art of making cartoons for publication in a newspaper and magazine is often held by some cartoonists to be a portal for the criticism of government. Most especially to those that practice its editorial form. While, those that make strips within the ambit of the familial types attempt to play pun with words for the purpose of making the reader that cares to read the cartoon laugh. In this regard, their subjects are boys, girls or a mixture of both genders. Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Ogbonna (2023: 48) aver that “Gender stereotyping refers to a set of commonly accepted beliefs or ideas regarding behaviours and activities deemed appropriate for males and females.” This is why the authors advance that stereotypes be revisited and viewed as life skills especially when they are not biological roles such as menstruation, pregnancy and breastfeeding. In the midst of this large number of cartoonists’ works, a handful of cartoonists, usually men choose a female subject and take the willing reader through an aspect of the subject’s life. This intention is usually meant to attempt to reveal the pattern of life that is drawn from the cartoonist’s cultural milieu.

This paper hypothetically holds that the Nigerian reader is not knowledgeable in comprehending the message of cartoon, as discursions are not common arising from the works published on the pages of newspapers and magazines. Cartoons are ordinarily categorized into two branches of editorial and familial types. Editorial cartoons are those that rely on the main news of the day or week as published by newspapers and news magazines; also called political cartoons. While, familial cartoons are those that attempt to arouse the readers’ sense of humour by playing pun with words, relying on various subjects such as children, men and women of all ages with attention on various societal agencies. These agencies range from schooling, hospitals, religious houses, the armed forces, and the family among others. The cartoonists that make strips of socio-cultural issues rely on these to comment on how their actions affect people negatively and how people’s wrong decisions and inactions take its toll their neighbours.

A randomly selected number of cartoonists that focus on females and couples attempt to reveal the variety of ways that women also take on their husbands’ willful ambivalent behaviour towards them. Ayo Oyerinde in the Punch newspaper has a female character, MAMA LANDLADY, he deliberately attempts as a suggestion of the right of a woman to own property. This is one aspect that seems to imply that she must be pragmatic about in real life when she is married to a man that sees a woman and a wife as an appendage. Oyerinde consistently presents the female subject to discourse intelligently with her concerns over hike in price of goods and services. In some cases, she is seen to play the same obnoxious role seen in male landlords. Bennet Omeke also in the Punch newspaper makes a strip that focuses on a couple, with the wife, been the dominant figure in size and act. EFE & JUDE are presented in a double panel cartoon strip that assumes the possibility that the wife is the brutish, husband battering type that makes all the decisions and expects her husband to cook for her without fail. This is Omeke’s attempt to advice some men given to this act to rethink their way of life and treat their wives well.

Dan Ifeagwu’s PUFF; can’t remember the magazine or newspaper it was published is similar to Omeke’s EFE & JUDE in that the female character is also fat and taller than her short husband,

KOLA. Whenever there is a quarrel, KOLA definitely gets a beating that sometimes leaves him with a dislocated arm and a bandaged head. He uses the range of 3 to 4 panel strip to express his thought on the possibility of, perhaps, that more women should become fat and liberate themselves from marital subjugation that has made some wives mute from incessant abuse. Dada Adekola in the Vanguard newspaper has relied on individual and shared cartooning platforms to reflect on the position of the female gender. He shared the character VIRGINIA with Ronke Adesanya, he shed some light on the challenges in working in an office dominated by men. He attempted to reveal the intrigues played by the women in an attempt to outsmart the men that are given to flirting. He also shows how the women play along for the sake of always having their way in order to get money off them at all cost. The sexist theme is evident in the story line as VIRGINIA's friend instead gores her on to make sure she does not believe anything the man says apart from getting money off him, instead of liberating from the shackle of chauvinism. The MR & MRS single cartoon strip is one of the longest running strips shared by some other cartoonists that attempt to depict the challenges faced by couples and how they are able to get by. Adekola, from one strip to the other attempts to give the woman a balanced chance at been heard, which is aimed at engendering a positive consideration of the woman's being, as a person and a wife.

Aliu Eroje in the Punch newspaper uses an elderly female dressed in blouse and wrapper with a corn-row hair style popularly called 'suku' amongst the Yoruba ethnic nationality, to sarcastically respond to the audible conversations between two passers-by she hears talking to each other. However, her response is presented in a thought bubble that is only meant for the reader, though primarily for the passer(s)-by. Eroje had started the strip with a male protagonist called PA JOHNSON, an elderly man in his seventies, before he got his feminine side working, and started MAMA LASISI. One common perception of the female gender by some male cartoonists is that belief in presenting a negative female identity through their subjects. It is pertinent to point out that, from observation, many cartoonists do not include female figures in their work when a crowd of people are presented in a cartoon strip. The issue presented in a cartoon can range from a wide variety of national issues; yet, a female figure might just be included in the group making it look like an afterthought. Femi Arowolo (FEMORA) in the Punch newspaper has TADE'S SECRET as a comic strip that tells of a young lady in her late teens or early 20s that is aware her father is cheating on her mother. She shares the information with her close female friend and continues to attempt to find out who the woman is, so as to confront both her father and the woman. These attempts to reveal the pain females suffer in the hands of some unfaithful men. Most of the other newspapers it seems, they are not directly interested in pursuing an aspect that gives the female a voice and identity; as this accounts for why there are more cartoonists in the Punch newspaper laying emphasis on the those faced by females in the likes of Folashade Adebare; Ronke Adesanya; Ijeoma Nwogu ;Emilia Onuegbu; Promise Adaora Onele among several.

Female Representation in Nigerian Cartoons

The male cartoonists outnumber the female cartoonists in Nigeria at a ratio of more than approximately 60:1, if not more. The likes of Folashade Adebare; National Concord newspaper, Ronke Adesanya; Vanguard and Nigerian Tribune newspapers, Ijeoma Nwogu, studied medicine at the University of Ibadan; Nigerian Tribune newspaper, Emilia Onuegbu, studied Law at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka; Punch newspaper, Promise Adaora Onele, specialized in Painting at The Polytechnic, Ibadan; The Sun newspaper, Uche Uguru, specialized in Painting at the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria; Nigerian Pilot newspaper and Gloria Ejimofor, specialized in Painting at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka; Guardian newspaper while on Industrial Training, have made their contributions to the cartooning art form. It is pertinent to state here unequivocally that some of the

information necessary for research into cartooning is difficult to gather from any of the cartoonists about their works and academic background. They are usually very impermeable when asked questions as they suspicious of one; perhaps from fear of litigations and libel suits that may be labelled against them over their work.

Of all these female cartoonists, only Ronke Adesanya made a concerted effort to raise concerns over the plight of the woman and attempted at representing the female identity through her comic, VIRGINIA, which she shared with Dada Adekola. As much as it is right to raise issues of concern in one's community, it is also expected that such a cartoonist should suggest probable solution to the issue raised. This is why Ndebele (2007) avers that

One accusation that has been levelled at writers, particularly in those countries hungry for radical change, is that many of them have not offered solutions to the problems they may have graphically revealed. It seems to me that this accusation has premised on the demand that artists produce works that will incite people to political action, something which most people will agree, is strictly speaking the task of the professional propagandist. (Nolim (2010). ...source.)

From the above statement, some cartoons seem to leave the solution to the reader to proffer despite the fact that hypothetically speaking, most Nigerian citizens are not educated in the language of cartooning art form. The various devices relied on to pass messages are rather perceived holistically thereby making most readers think it is a 'funny drawing' of the suggested subject presented. It is pertinent to note that all the female cartoonists mentioned in this study do not make cartoons any longer. Salami (2006) holds that in the representation of women "This obvious lack is responsible for the uncomplementing construction of negative female identity by some male writers who dominate the scene...many critics have thrown the responsibility back on the women...to rewrite their stories." One of such female cartoonists is Ronke Adesanya who made a comic strip titled VIRGINIA in TALES OF A CITY GIRL published in the Vanguard newspaper implying that a woman has the right to be heard in a world perceptively owned by men. In the conversation she generates through her female dominated comics, the tone of the problems raised and solution proffered always ends up with a female character responding as a messianic figure. The mode of dressing is that of a middle aged woman as seen in the first panel; 'ankara' fabric and a head tie, while the second woman to the right of the first panel is wearing what seems to be a gown. She presents the female identity as a person that has the emotionally balanced ability to self-lacerate as she reexamines her life through a variety of women conditions and proffers solutions.



Figure 1

Title: VIRGINIA in TALES OF A CITY GIRL

Artist: Ronke Adesanya

Date: May 18, 2001

Source: Vanguard newspaper

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Critique and Representation

This article relies on the feminist perspective to set the tone of the basic thrust of this study on Nd’Usoro’s randomly selected cartoons. Quayson (2007) asserts that “Feminism has been about challenging the representation of women and arguing for better conditions for them. Representation itself has at least two meanings, both of which are relevant to post-colonialism and feminism.” In the light of this, this article relies on Quayson’s assertion in the need for cartoonists to rethink their thought and creative processes so that readers will be presented with a balanced identity of the female gender. Enyew and Mihrete (2018) also advance that “In its central assumption, liberal feminism maintains that differences between women and men are not based on biology, which basically represents reproduction differences. Hence, women should have the same rights as men,…” The subject matter presented through the cartoons under study focus on a young female that is about tertiary institution age bracket. The female identity is depicted in attempt to reveal a growing challenge in decision making, yet without offering any solution through the accompanying female, or even through any of the male co-characters.

Nd’Usoro and the Construction of Female Identity

Nd’Usoro made cartoons and comics in the Punch newspaper in the early 2000s; 2003 to 2005 are the periods in which the works under study were published. He made cartoons bordering on politics, governance, social issues, wittiness in children and the challenges of making a choice of a husband amongst young ladies. The cartoon strip selected is titled NUBILA, a fictitious young lady he relied on for the purpose of revealing the challenges faced in the bid to get married. The number of cartoons and comics produced by the cartoonist is large but only six of the works have been selected to tease out the themes of sexism, materialism, manipulation and a general negative presentation and perception the female identity.

In the work in Figure 2 he lampoons fathers that make demands on their daughters to marry a rich man having forgotten their own humble beginnings.

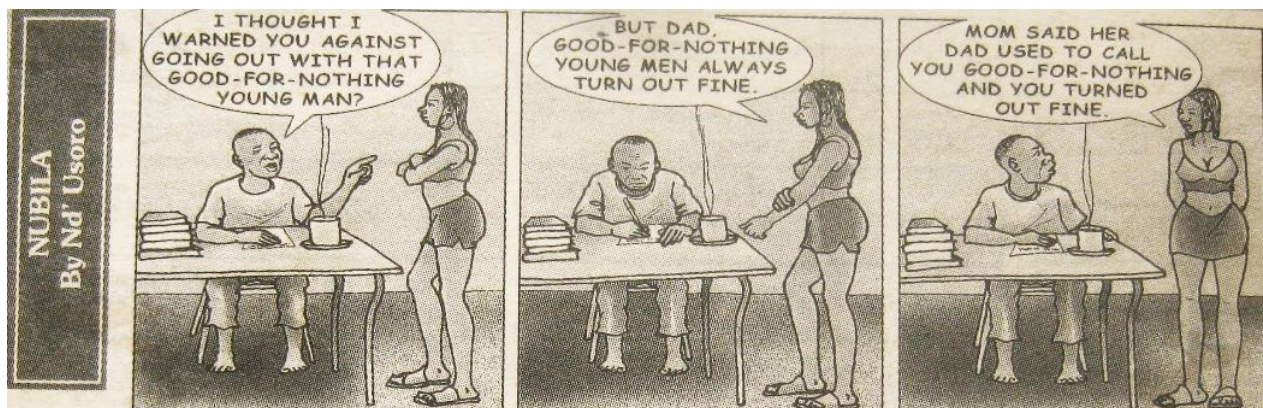


Figure 2

Artist: Nd’Usoro

Title: NUBILA

Date: no date

Source: Punch newspaper

NUBILA's response represents the female gender of the age bracket presented and has been portrayed in the positive light. But the query in is in the mode of dressing which is still not appropriate even though she is inside her father's house. She, and definitely her parents are portrayed as immoral and lacking in the ability to influence her choices positively which is ordinarily true of some parents. Since she is wise enough to know that love matters most in marriage, it makes one wonder how her dressing do not complement the right moral judgement she has shown in her response to her father over the basis for agreeing to marry a man. This contradiction makes one wonder if enough time is spent to think through the story presented before it is published. As sound as her moral judgement is depicted in this strip, the subsequent strips present a different person entirely in NUBILA.

In the next strip, she is making plan to sleep with as many rich men as possible so as to swell the amount of money she makes.



Figure 3

Artist: Nd'Usoro

Title: NUBILA

Date: no date

Source: Punch newspaper

In the first two panels, a female character is made to stand and challenge her plan, yet in the third panel, NUBILA is shown alone as she lay bare her intention, perhaps with the intention to surprise the reader. Despite the fact that the left-sided heading reads states the title as NUBILA...the bad influence. It does not necessarily suggest that there is any plan to dissuade her from her immoral intention. The common and expected practice seen of sequential works such as comics is that the strips are numbered to engender the reader to follow the strip in order not to lose the story and on the long run miss-interpret the message intended. In the net panel, NUBILA is presented as a whore, such that it is not clear who the 'bad influence' is between she and her friend whose boyfriend has been slept with.



Figure 4

Artist: Nd'Usoro

Title: NUBILA

Date: no date

Source: Punch newspaper

It would have been expected that a physical fight of punches, slaps, screams and bitter exchange of words should have ensued in the third panel. Yet, the friendship continues with the malicious attack on her roommate's boyfriend's inability to have long sexual intercourse. The cartoonist attempts to present an identity that is hard to comprehend as a female identity no matter how bad the influence. However, it rather makes the basic intention not educative let alone entertaining. In the next cartoon, he again portrays the female gender as nagging, demanding and materialistic.

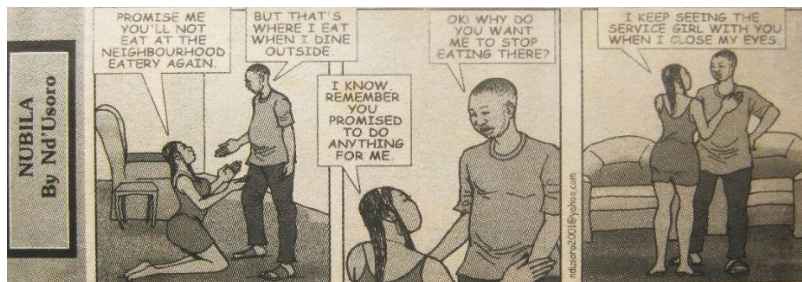


Figure 5

Artist: Nd'Usoro

Title: NUBILA

Date: no date

Source: Punch newspaper

In the third panel, a manipulative solution is offered such that the option of reciprocity in a relationship is not an option and making both and perhaps, all women selfish and materialistic all together. The stereotypical identity the cartoonist presents of the female gender is negative as he does not allow for another female voice to interject with a moral suggestion to attempt at portraying a woman in a positive light. In the next cartoon strip, the woman is presented as a paranoid and malicious person that will do nearly anything to have her way with a man.



Figure 6

Artist: Nd'Usoro

Title: NUBILA

Date: no date

Source: Punch newspaper

She kneels down in the first panel as though there is a request she is about to make in order to engender the growth of the relationship. By the third panel the portrayal will make a biased male gender easily believe that 'all women are the same'. Though some women of the age bracket presented might behave this way, cartoonists must be conscious of the fact that story telling requires careful planning. This will ensure that the suspense they are trying to create does not mislead the

audience despite a good intention. In the next strip just like the one in figure 5, moral judgement is thrown away for material thrust and lust.



Figure 7

Artist: Nd'Usoro

Title: NUBILA

Date: no date

Source: Punch newspaper

NUBILA in this cartoon offers a bad solution that does not portray the female in a good light since none of the panels suggests any solution. As much as this is true of some ladies, the strip has not offered any advice, not even to the male readers of both the rich and poor divide implying that the female gender is malicious. Salami explains that “Carol Davies commenting on this suggests that Soyinka’s works reveal enough female stereotypes to suggest a definite sexist bias against women. She emphasized that he treats women as object of quest rather than as subjects in their own rights.” It is pertinent to state in the light of Davies’ position, that a woman exudes power and authority over her soul and being. This unequivocally accounts for why she, being a human can think rationally the same way a man can. What make the male different from a woman is just the physical biological differences, but the intellect and rational thought process and abilities are mostly the same.

Nd’Usoro’s works presented here has latently entrenched a patriarchy and consequently perpetuating female subjugation. This has overtly smeared the female identity such that a biased man will easily hold firmly to the perceptions presented of the female age bracket presented and become to lay claim on some experiences had to label the generality of the female gender. His work is replete with a woman-centred intention, yet, the mode of dressing of all the women in his cartoon and comic imply that ladies of the age bracket presented dress indecently. It is evidently possible to create a strip of three panels and present a balanced view of any gender no matter the negative aspect intended. Evwierhoma (2006) opines that “Making women the epicenter of criticism is no misdeed. Even the act of appropriating plays to suit women’s needs is not an offence. There is need for a central women’s identity...” This simply calls for a balanced representation that allows and enables the frailty and capacity of the female gender to be viewed as a forthright being, thereby recognizing the feminine forte as earlier shown in the third panel of Figure 2.

Discussion

This study holds that the cartoonist did not plan to make a heroine out of NUBILA as she is always presented to be on a quest for self-destructive end. This gives her an identity of an irredeemable immoral female that is mostly surrounded by people that are mute at making any attempt to make a mold of good behaviour in her. Chinweizu et al in Nolim (2010) avers that

The artist in the traditional African milieu spoke for and to his community. His imagery, themes, symbolism, and forms were drawn from a communally accessible pool. He was heard. He made sense, and again: For the function of the artist in Africa, in keeping with our traditions and needs, demands that the writer, as a public voice, assume, a responsibility to reflect public concerns in his writings, and not preoccupy himself with his puny ego.

Today, there is a sense in which some modern artists have created a dividing line with the aid of newly acquired western knowledge of the use of cartooning art form to haunt, especially the female gender. This is perhaps, why Igbolo and Ejue advance that “The sum of these qualities was closely associated with social expectations on the notions of femininity in respect to her as a wife and mother.” Rather than speak to and be heard by his community, he overtly speaks against an integral part of the community with negative generalizations that makes her look unrepentantly bad, with reference to figures 5 and 7. NUBILA is described as a temptress and depicted in the femme fatale ideology in figures 3 to 7, subjecting her to a mental state of desperation and despondence. There is no doubt that there are females within the age range of NUBILA that live their lives in wantonness, yet, such females basically have an opposing voice that relentlessly empathize in constant attempt dissuade them from a wrong path of life.

This perception the cartoonist has presented is similar to the Bible story of the ‘woman that was caught in adultery’. There was no man with her in the gospel according to Saint John chapter 8 verses 4 to 11 when she was brought to Jesus Christ to be stoned to death. Though Christ taught forgiveness of sin based on the demand from her accusers to have killed, it is a mystery that adultery meant a woman ‘forcing a man into sexual intercourse’. There is a sense in which the man gets venerated as a result of patriarchy at, and over any incidence of rape and prostitution. Aidoo in Nolim asserts that “Unless a particular writer commits his or her energies actively to exposing the sexist tragedy of women’s history; protesting the on-going degradation of women; celebrating their physical and intellectual capabilities, and above all unfolding a revolutionary vision of the role of women tomorrow, as dreamers, thinkers, and doers, they cannot be described as feminist writers.” The above statement describes the general intention of the article with the aim that cartoonists in particular will go a little further to improve on their story telling skills. The sensibilities they intend to present to their readers will subsequently be, that imbued with a balanced perspective that speaks of the uplifting and triumph of the human spirit. As much as freedom of expression allows every individual to make choices of material for use, there is also the boundary within the seeming boundlessness of freedom to create art sensitively. Ekpenyong (2003) holds that “Style as choice entails an artist’s freedom to select a certain range of materials from the pool of available resources... These selections of patterns... go a long way to reveal not only the cohesion through text... but also... themes, tone and artistic vision as carriers of meaning”.

The above author speaks of the need for an artist to make a choice from an experiential pool, rather than making assumption to think he or she has the comprehension of the opposite sex’s nature hence, the decision to create art on the opposite gender’s situation. Though the cartoonist in through these works attempted to a make a biographical declaration but, has not been able to represent the female identity in a balanced view. His attempt to make the work sincerely admonitory has led to a representation that rather shows the female as an irredeemably bad person that cannot be advised.

Conclusion

The cartoonist through the identity portrayed in NUBILA avers that the female is always on a quest for mere material satisfaction through perverse means. She also presented as a minor, powerless and is a dependant that is unable to support the male in the bid to achieve a common good. The male

point of view of the female identity is biased, and does not suggest the capacity in the gender owning the ability to poses and exhibit sound judgement. He portrays the sexuality of the female to be unstable such that she is depicted to be deliberately perverse in her thinking and mode of dressing. The work is not sympathetic to the female character, thus excluding the women from having a positive identity of their selves. He also portrays the men to be the ones that own the right and capacity to make decisions, which are seldom beneficial to the female in the world depicted. The evocation of moral decadence by the cartoonist ought to be countered by another character's response to serve as a moral compass to rebut the downward-spiral of NUBILA's mind-set. Suffice to say therefore, that the image production spun from the webs of patriarchy and furnished by bias instead attempts to generously stain the female identity.

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