

Excerpts of Adulations for Womanhood in Robert Ebizimor's Songs: A Cultural Feminist Perspective

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Songs by Robert Ebizimor, an Izoŋ indigenous popular poet, is believed to be inclined towards addressing issues of women's suppression and devaluation in society. However, his songs have since remained unexplored by scholars through this perspective. This paper focuses on investigating the treatment of women in selected songs by the singer. Through the qualitative analytical method, the paper carefully looks at images and ideas built around women, and seeks to explain how the images help the women course. Anchored on the theory of feminism, with specific reliance on the cultural feminist mode, the paper reveals that the songs are dominated by a strong feeling of opposition to the devaluation and denigration of women, noticed in the positive imaging, exaltation and even a strong preference for the life, nature and role of the female sex over the male. It argues that this is based on a thoughtful re-examination of well-known potentials attributed to women, rather than the premeditated and bias assumptions rooted in patriarchy. The paper, therefore, demonstrates, conclusively, that the contest for the revaluation of women is an ideal case, representing a worthy effort towards attaining mutual respects for the agency of not just women but their men counterpart.

Keywords: Songs, Robert Ebizimor, Izoŋ, popular poet, women, images, patriarchy, feminism.

Introduction

Issues of women remains a significant talking point in literary expressions which has affirmed the intersection between literature and gender as an important but unending discourse. As with gender issues that shape literary expressions, for centuries have cultures and societies believed to undermine the role and status of women under the influence of patriarchy. The popular notion is that cultural and traditional practices at different points made women victims of exploitation, oppression and suppression. Collins observes that this is noticed in the home, cultural and traditional roles and mores, and then any organizations and social institutions (qtd in Ekine, 2008, p. 70). There is also the admission that women are inferior beings, aggravated by the fact that they are marginalized, with no opportunity to compete favourably with men. By design, they are only

restricted to engaging in domestic activities like managing the home, most especially the kitchen (Ejukonemu, 2018), whereas men play superior roles, sometimes tending to be lords because of the advantageous position guaranteed them by patriarchy. In addition, Afolabi notes that "most women spent their lives in cooking, cleaning, child care and elderly parents' care while men were not involved in these family's care duties" (<https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2018.00040>).

Affirming the existence and the rationale for the "role differentiation" in the past and present of many African societies, Omadjohwoefe (2011, p. 69) writes:

For instance, within the family institution at present and in the past, it is obvious that the female members of the family constitute the second sex. The man is always the head of the household. He is regarded as the breadwinner and the ultimate decision

maker; every other person is a subject. The man determines the social status of the other members of the family.

Andelin (1990) attributes the situation of women anywhere in the world not to custom or tradition, but divine. According to her, it was by God's intention that man was placed at the head of the family when he says to Eve, "Thy desire shall be unto thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (p. 124). Similarly, Endurance et al (2014) disclose that the degradation, denigration and discrimination against women is in almost every religion. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that gender roles assigned to women, from time past to present, are intended to keep them at the bottom of the ladder in society. It is worrisome that this long aged patriarchal power-play unleashed on women has continued to subsist and affect their lives in all aspects in spite that they constitute half of the human race (Omoru and Lemoha, 2014). As they are denied of vital and critical roles to play, it in turn affects the total growth and development of the human society. This is because restrictions placed on them by the existing patriarchal structures unpin their individual growth and development (Simon, 2010), which would have been of great advantage to the larger society.

However, the roles women play in their outright relegated status have been adjudged, and celebrated, to be of great significance in the upkeep of the family and society generally. This is more so as they are reported to have shown the desire and willpower to go beyond their traditional roles to assert themselves in contributing to the sustenance of their homes or families. Afisi (2010, p. 236) acknowledges

the traditional roles of women to include "care-giving, home making and nurturing roles of women in Africa family which formed the basis of their identity as wives and mother", however notes that they have "become increasingly involved in new roles and relations outside the home". This development, he notes, is encouraged by the "increased political, social and economic empowerment" that has come the way of Africa women. These extended activities, to an extent, have made them less depended and shown to have countered the notion that women are the "weaker sex". This change recorded is associated with feminism, a movement and body of theories that advocate for the right and liberation of women.

The combination of the thought about the obvious devaluation of women, and the need to value them like their men counterpart in view of their identifiable potentials to contribute meaningfully to the betterment of society has truly found a strong presence in literary expressions. This is inclusive of the song art-form. This paper believes that Robert Ebizimor in his songs focuses on this critical issue, thereby making the contents of the songs rich and attractive for literary investigation. It is in the light of this consideration that this paper embarks on a critical examination of the lyrics of his songs. The article concentrates on investigating the treatment of women in selected songs by the popular oral poet, seeking to answer questions about what particular images are built around women in the songs; what does the images suggest, and how do they advance the belief in the potential of women.

Method and Materials

The method used in this paper is the qualitative content analysis which involves a subjective interpretation of the content of text data, with the hope of discovering and highlighting underlying themes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1278), The primary data is the lyric-texts of three songs selected which are: “Eyoro-otu”, Ereke ebimo” and “Late Madam Comfort”. The selection is based on the understanding that they are thematically rich for in-depth analysis. Consideration is given to the fact the lyrics are in the singer’s indigenous Izon language, which requires transcription and translation into English for effective analysis. In the course of identifying and analysing the underlying information as themes, scholarly views and opinions sourced from journal articles, off and online, textbooks and other valuable materials, are also relied upon to give authenticity and credibility to the discussion.

This paper is built on the theoretical foundation of feminism, which stands as a movement and collection of theories that gives priority to addressing the problems of women. As a theory, feminism has resulted into several types and sub-types, or dimensions suitable for various literary interpretations. For the purpose of this paper, the cultural feminist strand is used. Cultural feminism is said to have evolved out of radical feminism that intended outright uprooting of patriarchal structure, in line with the objective of attaining social change for women. However, radical feminism failed in its quest, given rise for the need to turn attention to cultural feminism with

the hope that if women cannot change the existing structure in the society,” they could at least avoid it as much as possible” (Bisong & Ekanem, 2014, p. 34). Thus, cultural feminism, which is reported to have been introduced by Brook Williams in 1975, is rooted on the notion that women are endowed with “special qualities” that make them equal of men or even superior. Putting it explicitly, Hussain (2019, p. 232) explains that:

The theory that there are fundamental personalities differences between men and women, and those women’s differences are special and should be celebrated. This theory affirms the notion that men and women are different biologically due to which women are kinder and they can rule the world in a nice manner free from fear and tensions of war and weapons.

As highlighted above, the demands that those qualities be marked out and celebrated is the crux of this paper. In other words, attempt is made to analyse how Ebizimor conceived of this cultural feminist perspective so that it finds a dominant expression in his songs. Cultural feminism is said to parade notable proponents which include Margaret Fuller, Frances Willard, Jane Addams, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Results and Discussion:

Excerpts of Adulations for Womanhood in the Songs

Ebizimor’s Izon society which provides the social context of his songs does not show to be eschewed from patriarchal oppression and devaluation of women. The religious, social and cultural beliefs and

practices have shown to hold the Izon woman down like it is elsewhere. She is subjected to the dictates and supremacy of patriarchal authority in whatever nomenclature she is identified with; whether as a girl-child, wife or mother. According to Omadjohwoefe (2011), Izon women have found themselves reduced to the level of a slave, “undervalued”, tormented and hunted by patriarchy. Asuka (2010) reveals that their subservient status to men has made them the poorest, more so, the wretched of the wretch among the Izons in the Niger Delta. Their level of hopelessness and poverty is manifested mostly in the economic activities they carried out in order to survive. In support of the above, Fasoranti and Ote (2007) writing about the poverty of Izon women dwelling in the rural areas of Nigeria, disclose the economic engagements of women that portray and categorise them as poor fellows, saying:

The Ijaw rural women...engage in such activities as fishing, trading, farm work and other economic activities just as other rural women in Nigeria; though the economic pursuits of the rural women in Nigeria differ particularly as a result of the environmental and ecological factors. In Ijawland, there seems to be division of labour in traditional economy, such that men are usually tappers of raffia palm and carvers of canoes while women engage mostly in fishing and fish trading. Still, other Ijaw women work in the farm i.e. cultivating land as a support to their fishing (p. 573).

From the social to the economic front, the revelations do not point to something cheering about women. This is despite the innate qualities that they exhibit and bring to bear on their overall endeavours as women. Yet, the

general perception stands that they remain at the lowest ebb of the structure of the society. But while this belief tends to stand, Ebizimor seems to take a differing position, even though as a male member of same society. Then, his trade as a song-poet privileges him to assume an antithetical position to patriarchal notions notched against women, in line with the views of cultural feminism. As such, his songs under investigation are believed to have been motivated by the need to side women and broadcast their worthiness. The first song, “Eyoro-otu”, captures the singer’s demonstration of adulation for women based on the perceivable, but unthinkably undermined attributes that they have for ages used to add value to society.

In the song, the singer contextualises every woman as a relative, daughter, wife and mother (all in one) in relation to those special qualities that enable her play many useful roles in society. Dispelling the patriarchal construct that undermines and undervalues her agency, the singer treasures women by dropping the strong message that “woman is precious”. This particular submission hinges on the consideration of the passion she brings in to render kinder and nurturing services in the society that supersedes that of men. Strikingly, in the order of importance in the hierarchy of beings (both spiritual and physical), after Jesus Christ, the singer considers women before her male counterpart. This is not far from the belief of the Izon people that God is attributed with feminine qualities, which supposes that, in truth, God to the people is a female, but that God is a masculine name imposed on a female being (Dime, 2004). Okaba and Appah (1999, p.

151) have affirmed this Izon belief while commenting on the attributes of the personality of the Supreme Being:

The universe owes its existence to her great power... Her supreme qualities and attributes are reflected in some common names given to children. These include; Temearau agono emi (God is up above), Temearau preye (God's gift), Ayibanaghan (Thanks to God), Oginarau-ebi (God's kindness), Oyingi-Ogula (God's judgment).

This is a universal truth about the attributes of God anywhere in the world. From the Izon perspective, women should be the first important gender. But patriarchy has appropriated the position to men. This may not be unconnected to a deliberate devaluation of the potentials and roles of women which the singer disproves. The qualities of hard work, love, protection and sacrifice are identified as her assets that make her invaluable, contrary to postulations that reduce and treat her as weak, inferior and inconsequential. By virtue of these innate qualities, she does a lot of impressive things, especially to make men, particularly, stay happy and comfortable. As the Supreme Being is the reason that humanity exists, women are the reason men live. This understanding follows a careful and an unbiased revaluation that compels the singer to place women in their original place. The singer relies on a number of things women do that impact on the lives of men. He argues that it starts from the bed when both wake up from the night sleep. While the man sits comfortably on a chair, she dresses up the bed, washes the man's dirty clothes and tidies it up the room.

Also, "the child you bear together"/"she takes him to a massager"/"Whenever the child falls sick". The singer climaxes the role of women by building a god-like image around them that "when it's daytime"/"she carries you like a child".

In furtherance, women do more important things to justify the singer's position. The love they show to their husbands whom patriarchy wrongly places as the head of the society, is shown to be amazing. They prefer to be loyal to their husbands against at all time, no matter the circumstances. This is pointed out in the song when the singer observes that women have a personality whose affection for their husbands cannot be sacrificed even on the occasion of their parents' ill-health. In the words of the singer:

Ere keme menẹ zi yin ke doun menẹ
ke gba kpọ
menẹ yin ke tain gbein menẹ kpọ
agou nimi gha
Ere keme menẹ zi dau ke doun menẹ
ke
gba kpọ
menẹ yin ke tain gbein menẹ kpọ
agou nimi gha
Even when her mother falls sick

She abandons her for her husband
Without knowing
When her father falls sick
She abandons him for her husband
without knowing

(translation mine).

This attribute does not in any way show that women are completely subservient to patriarchy, but an acceptance of their role as a wives and mothers, which is paramount and must be respected for a harmonious relation. This is likened to Jesus Christ in the bible denying his parents because he has a more important assignment to humanity. It is the understanding of this role women play as mothers and wives in the Ijo communities that respect for motherhood remains high (Alagoa, 2003).

The singer climaxes and heightens his fondness for the attributes of women in drawing a comparison of a white cloth and the heart of a woman. It is fascinating that the singer opines that the colour white is not even as pure as the woman's heart. This metaphorical explication becomes expedient in order to stress the point that women are trustworthy and good-natured while carrying out their protective role. It further demonstrates how harmless they are. Even when offended, they evince the trait of forgiveness. Hence, the singer finds the heart of women to be extremely pure, or "purer than the white cloth". They maintain this personality even in an obscure relation with men, which the singer expresses in:

Anẹ agou mẹnẹ kpọ wẹnẹ ke wẹnẹ

timi gbeli emi

mẹşẹ kẹmẹ oginigini dei dein

ekan fe gha

kọnọwei ọru tuwa wẹrẹ dei

dein ekan fe gha

You met her by accident

And brought her into your home

She doesn't change to a python

To swallow you at night

She has no eyes of a lion

To devour you at night

(translation mine)

The above lines induce a powerful image of women that leave the listeners in wonderment. In truth, it builds the image of fear around women and exposes the vulnerability of man's life. But in these god-like image and vulnerable state of men, have women been very nice to men. Therefore, women should not be seen as the appendage or slaves to men because, by the image painted, based on their relationship with men, they are too important to be looked down. That is why the idea of she been elevated to the pedestal next to the spiritual beings of God and Jesus is conceived and treated as the theme in the song. It follows a strong appeal to men to eulogise them wholeheartedly. This message is strongly captured in the lines:

Owei kẹmẹ duwo mo kẹmẹ owei la

skpo kpo kpo enana wẹrẹ emi ere kile

pekei bai dẹ şẹ

Nanaowei emo kile bou dẹ şẹ

Jesus emo kile ọu dẹ şẹ

enana wẹrẹ emi ere kile

Every man

Try thank your wife

When it's dawn

After thanking God

After thanking Jesus

Say thank you my wife you
(translation mine)

In the second song, “Ere ke ebimo”, the singer compares the individual life of women to men, and extends his admiration for the former. Again, he downplays, unequivocally, the notions of patriarchy regarding women. He does not believe that women’s place in the society and the life they live is second-rated actually, to the extent of drawing empathy. Rather, it is man’s life that deserves such empathy, despite being touted to be well-placed in society. He attributes this positivism in women’s life to their “nature” that cultural feminism values and seeks to revalidate. His portraiture of women in this song shows that they are better placed and live a good and quiet life, which to the singer is the ultimate and the best life. This is in sharp contrast to man’s life, riddled with the numerous miseries of the world. It can be taken as a mockery in the song, because it depicts the shortcomings of patriarchy which hitherto has not been used to measure up the life of men. The singer seems to believe that the cause for the numerous problems men face in the world is the male distinctive biological features or organs. Specifically, the “penis” and “scrotum” that are said to be used as symbolic instruments of female oppression, are actually the source of men’s problem in the world. In the song, the irony, which the mockery is built, unfolds when the singer says God gave him these organs so that:

Dẹin koro ya koro kpọ nimi gha

Dẹin bai ya bai kpọ nimi gha

When it’s dusk, I do not know
When it’s dawn, I do not know”.
(translation mine)

This is in recognition of the overwhelming challenges men face as a result of their gender. Man is overwhelmed by the enormity of the things he does in order to survive in the world. This is not what the singer observes in the lives of women. At this point, the singer’s feeling also becomes suggestive of a subtle attack on the Supreme Being who shows to favour her gender. Hence, he is compelled to hate the fact that he came into the world as a male sex, instead of the female sex. He says he has no pride to be called a man because of the convoluted life that is assign to men by the Supreme Being. The singer’s feeling echoes the words of Stella Akinola (Personal communication, 10 December, 2024), who asserts that she is not bothered about who is dominating, but that she is more comfortable being a woman. For her, the female sex, of a truth, is less with life’s oddities, demands, risks, temptations, pressures and challenges. Like the singer, she prays to return to this world a woman even in twenty times. The singer’s disinclination for his own gender and his prayer which advances a strong preference and adulation for the feminine gender is conveyed through:

E gba mo

Ere bebe emo minyẹn o

Ayibara seisei o

Tu ka kẹmẹ tẹmẹ ma

ere ke e tẹmẹ o

I say,

am not for manhood

God, I plead with you
If you would recreate humanity
Make me a woman

(translation mine)

In support of his argument that being a woman is better, the singer alludes to specific Izon women in the different Izon communities whose lives are the quintessence of womanhood. The women as listed in the song include Turuku and Return from Bomadi, Okubo-ere and Geintu from Kpakama, Ogbein-ama, Bala-agbe and Margaret from Ojobo, Agomo-ere from Sagbama, Eziri and Ofinayan from Angalabiri, Diyapoun from Okpokunu, Youkere-ere from Indoro, Tinapa from Ayakoroma, Pakiri from Tuomo, Brandi from Esama and Keiku from Torugbene.

In all these, apart from their “quiet” and “peaceful life”, what the singer observes that is most striking about womanhood is the attributes of love and caring. He seems to be particularly fascinated by the flexibility of women showing these qualities, not just to their husbands alone, but extending same to all men. In this poem, he sings about women’s quiet life and benevolence from the point of view of a beneficiary. This particular motivation follows his encounter with a woman who, while he was stranded at Torugbene community enroute a visit to the king of all Izons in the Amabulou creek, emerges and rescues him. According to the singer, the woman, called Keigu, approaches him and voluntarily seeks to know about his ordeal. After listening, the woman, with good heart, responds in a manner that supports the singer’s preference for the female gender. He

is seen to be overwhelmingly impressed by her attitude which is demonstrated in how:

Keigu te ara weṅe mu
meṅe ware ba engine seri mo
meṅe aro ba sai

Robert peṛe weṛe you mu Amaboula
ka peṛe di timi

wai bo Torubgene ogbo
I Keigu went back to her house
Returned with her engine
Fastened it to her boat
For Robert to get to Amabulou
To meet the King
And return to Torugbene

(translation mine)

In the same vein, in the final section of the song, as evidence to what makes womanhood preferable to manhood, the latter being characterised by misery and dissatisfaction, the singer draws the attention of his listeners to Ijaw men like “Wenetu” and “Audu” whose appalling conditions he relates represent the generality of the true condition of manhood. Giving this sense of reality, he counsels that if one wishes to give birth to a child in this world, it must be female. This is because the miseries that await the opposite sex are inevitable.

The singer continues his eulogy for women in the third song, “Late Mama Comfort”, a song composed as a dirge. He does so by comparatively scaling the worth of men and women, and expectedly ends up maintaining same strong preference for the latter over the former. He begins in the song by reiterating his earlier submission that women

of his conviction. At this point, he does not seem to entertain any form of opposition. Therefore, in the song, there is the pervasive feeling of acceptance that men are no match to women in a scaling between both genders. This is as he buttresses the thought with further query on another philosophical plain:

Akpọ bẹ dau mọ yin mọ
 yọu timi nẹ
 abade ọturu ma beni de aba
 e bọlọu tubọu ka ke sai ye mo
 Just by that moment in this world
 When your father and mother
 Get drown in the river
 Who is your first choice for rescue?
 Motherhood's thickness is
 immeasurable.

(translation mine)

In the above, the singer draws on the figure of speech called hypophora, which a speaker asks a question and then gives an answer used both “in poetry and prose, as well as in the speeches of well-known orators or politicians” (Babayev, 2023, p. 104). In the first place, the question arising from the context of the river incident is thoughtfully appropriate to resolve the contention of who should be more valued between men and women. The belief is that the answer is too obvious to be debated. It is only the unphilosophical minds that will not see the overwhelming importance of the mother over the father, when the absence of either is to be evaluated. It signals a philosophical method to further unearth and foregrounds the truth about women which has been misrepresented by patriarchy. The answer in the metaphorical allusive mode of “Motherhood is like an

object/Whose thickness is immeasurable” clearly communicated the position of the singer.

Conclusion

This paper had looked at the issue of women. It particularly examined the subject-matter from the point of view of the Ijaw social and cultural background with the aim to reveal the true status of women in human society. This was done paying attention to the songs of the Ijaw popular song-poet, Ebizimor, bearing in mind of possible opposition to patriarchal devaluation of women. The singer, as the most conscious member of the society, is informed by the significant role women play, which placed them side by with men. The songs are, therefore, the medium with which he craves for the acceptance and recognition of the role of women, if the betterment of society is to be achieved. This is why Asuka (2010, p. 43) says: “Ebizimor sees his songs and music as the only way to educate, reconstruct and socially engineer the Ijaw society”.

From the analysis, the paper supports the view that women, despite the general notion that portrays them as weak, inferior and insignificant, are gifted with special qualities that make womanhood unique and palpable in society. It argued that the songs stand out to demonstrate and establish that the singer identifies such qualities which include hard work, sacrifice, love, protection with the objective to eulogise them. From Eyeoro-otu” to “Ere ke ebimo” and “Late Madam Comfort” the importance of women over men is re-echoed, noting the singer’s elevation of women above men, and way before God and

His son, Jesus Christ, in the hierarchy of beings. Women are compared to God based on the view that their caring and protective role, which happens to men as they navigate from the comfort of their mothers to their wives (same woman figure), is similar to God who is ever present everywhere. More so, the truth about women comes with the revelation that their life and nature, which define womanhood, contrast that of manhood which the singer painted full of cruelty and ruthlessness, thereby lacking the worthiness of a life that men should be proud of.

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