

Feminist Consciousness and Societal Change: The Woman's Voice in Vincent Egbuson's *Love My Planet*

Nkechinyere CHUKWU
Department of English
University of Ibadan, Nigeria
nkechinyerefavour@yahoo.com
08038344617

Abstract

Feminist consciousness, the awareness that women should be given the same rights and opportunities as men, is created through literature. Existing studies on *Love My Planet* have mostly focused on its ecological perspective while its feminist engagement is meagerly explored. This study, therefore, examines women as agents of social change in the novel. Egbuson's *Love My Planet* is purposely chosen for this study owing to the consciousness it raises about certain societal acts and practices that are inimical to meaningful existence of women, as well as its protest against such acts and practices through the voice of the woman. This study adopts radical feminism as theoretical framework to reveal the woman's voice of protest in seeking liberation from repressive acts that are detrimental to women's personhood and societal development. One of the findings of the paper is that the woman's liberation is fought for by women themselves through a female character, Toundi, who through the power of the pen protests against female genital mutilation, child marriage, harmful widowhood practices, preference for male children, dowry system, women degrading advertisement as well as other acts and practices that engender oppression against women. The pen, therefore, becomes a 'weapon' in the hand of the new Nigerian woman in particular and African woman in general in combating injustice against womanhood. The selected text depicts women as agents of positive impact and their contribution to the positive development of the society.

Key words: Feminist consciousness, Patriarchy, Women's liberation, Vincent Egbuson

Introduction

Treatment of individuals of a particular race, ethnicity or sex is dependent on how such individuals are perceived by others that are not of the same group. This accounts for usage of terms like racism, xenophobia, minority, and weaker vessels to describe such concepts or individuals. Sometimes, the image given to such persons is different from the reality. It is often negative, demeaning,

downgrading, repulsive, and to a greater extent encourages oppression or domination against such individuals.

Women are among individuals who are sometimes being referred to as weaker vessels, perhaps because of how they are perceived by men who are not of the same sex with them. As a result, men tend to exert domination over them. Patriarchal culture inculcates into men a sense of superiority and as a result, makes them believe that women were created for their service. The bias against the female sex is betrayed by some of the cultural practices in Africa whereby a woman is regarded as property to be acquired by a man in order to serve his purpose. Gboyega Kolawole concurs with the above opinion by stating that in that kind of setting, “a woman’s primary duty is to wait for a suitor in marriage and produce a male heir for her husband” (13). He further attributes this perception to her biological characteristics such as child-bearing, nurturing infants and bearing menopause. He believes that some of these features “trigger a degree of discrimination or repression against her” (13).

Literature Review

Some scholars believe that there is silence over injustice against women in the traditional setting of Africa. The reason for this silence is that some practices that breed oppression against women are sternly held as part of culture, especially in Africa. Culture is explored in literary works. Literature is used to capture the woman’s situation in African cultural environment. Literary writers used their works to recount the experiences of the African woman in the pre-colonial period. Later, some of the pioneer African writers (males especially) came under the attack of scholars for relegating women to the background or doing what some critics refer to as ‘imprisonment’ of women on the pages of their books. Among the writers that were alleged of denigrating women in their earlier works was Chinua Achebe, who received the highest attack. Scholars bluntly frowned at the way he downplayed women in *Things Fall Apart*. Idowu Adeniyi bluntly frowned at how African male writers misrepresented women in their earlier works. According to him,

... the representation of women in their texts is nothing short of slavery, weakling, backwardness, and other derogatory stereotypes, which reveal their belief that woman is subservient to man, that they (women) can do nothing about their situation other than to accept their lots. The motivating factor for this negative portrayal of women by some African authors is probably a validation of their belief that women amount to nothing in the society (60).

For Adeniyi, the decision of African male authors to portray the male sex in the light of ‘usefulness’ and women in the light of ‘uselessness’ in their earlier works is predicated on their belief in women’s ‘worthlessness’ in society.

However, such critics who share a similar opinion with Adeniyi on African male authors’ demeaning of women in their earlier works, fail to put into consideration the utmost aim behind their writings at the earlier stage of African literature. The utmost concern of the writers at that time was to project African culture through literature in order to achieve two major aims: protection of African dignity and redemption of her image, which was lost to colonialism. Ernest Emenyonu highlighted the motive of the writers thus:

The writer sought to instill a new sense of dignity in the Africans, urging them to believe without any fear of contradiction that the African past had respectability; that African ancestors had dignity, social justice, law and order, love and brotherhood; and that music, art, aesthetic recreation and impressive cultural values flourished in the precolonial African society (49).

The literary writers at that time were more interested in projecting African culture and national dignity as against the wrong perception of non-African writers who in their writings portray Africa as a dark continent and Africans as a people without culture. At that time, 'image of women' in literary works was not the objective of their writings; what was of utmost importance to them was 'image of Africa'. For this reason, their major aim was to use their literary works to play a redemptive role with regard to Africa's image. In line with the above, Ramonu Sanusi identifies two major reasons behind African writings at that earlier stage. First, according to him, "... the African man appeared on the African literary scene to tell his own stories and attack erroneous colonial writings in a view to combating arrogant views of the superiority of European culture" (2). Second, they write to expose "the coloniser's misdeeds on the continent" (2). The aim of the writers is summed up in what Gabriel Bamgbose described as "writing back" (156). African writers 'write back' to non-Africans to educate and inform them of the beauty of 'Africanness' as well as the validity of African cultural heritage from a realistic point of view.

In the light of the foregoing opinions, this study argues that the African male writers could not have avoided what Allwell Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu called "the most momentous ... issues in the country's history" (53) for other things they felt that were less pressing at that time; because any writer who does that would amount to that man in the African proverb who leaves his burning house to chase rats fleeing from the fire. It is worthy of note that if, for instance, Achebe had represented women in the way that was different from reality of their existence in Igbo patriarchal society at that time in an attempt to enhance women's image, it would have amounted to doing what this study perceived as 'unrealistic romanticisation of reality' and he would have deviated from 'vision-driven' writing to engaging in a mere academic exercise.

Theoretical Leanings

Although the term 'feminism', according to Sanusi, "connotes different things to various people, societies, feminist writers, and critics" (14), what is central to the diverse opinions on the concept, as observed by Remy Oriaku is "a notion of male dominance of society and a concomitant marginalization of women" (130). The definition given to the term by an individual or a group is usually dependent on the observed peculiarities of women's experiences in a particular cultural environment (Akorede 9). However, what is common to most gender-inclined theories and approaches like feminism, womanism, motherism, stiwanism and nego-feminism, is concern for women's welfare. In her opinion, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo believes that "feminism posits that women should have equal rights and chances with men in every aspect of human experience: politically, legally, economic, social, etc" (11). Akorede reiterates that:

Feminist ideology rests firmly on the proposition that women should be given equal rights and opportunities as men. It articulates the politics of gender discrimination, exploitation and liberation. It is an ideology that articulates the yearnings of most women who become conscious of the negative impositions being a woman have brought upon them in their different cultural environments (19).

Feminists are set out to address any form of oppression, subjugation, dehumanisation and suppression against women in order to achieve justice for them. It is worthy of note that the primal motive of feminism is not to canvass for equality of the men with the women or to instigate enmity between men and women; it is rather to insist on fair treatment for both sexes. Feminists are individuals (men and women) that advocate fair treatment for women, among whom are creative writers who employ their imaginative creativity to embark on “a definite ... mission to enlighten and re-educate readers about critical issues of being a woman in African” (Emenyeonu 70). They, through representation of female characters whose life-worth are impactful to their society, are particularly interested in correcting false image and perception about women, especially as induced by patriarchal system. Through thorough orientation, they hope to unmask and demystify those false beliefs that surround injustice against women. Among these writers in mission is Vincent Egbuson, who used his novel, *Love My Planet*, to vehemently assert that being a woman does not in any way connote inferiority. There are different models of feminism but this study appropriates a radical feminist perspective in interrogating the role of women as agents of social change in the text.

Perception of Women in Patriarchal Environments

Akorede notes that “patriarchal observations and conclusions about women reflect a deep misinformation and lack of understanding of the woman and her capabilities” (27). Negative perception of women is clearly reflected in how they are addressed and treated in text and context. Beauvoir as quoted in Adeniyi traced the denigration of women to Aristotle, who believes that “the female is a female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities ... we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness” (60). This confirms that the erroneous perception of women and its consequent abasement has an ancient root. It is even worse in Africa where culture is strictly patriarchal. In describing patriarchy and its implication for women, Adeniyi explained that it “fosters tyranny, injustice, inequality, subjugation of one sex and objectification of another [in this case the female]” (58).

Patriarchy places men at an advantageous position and women at disadvantageous side. It empowers men as persons to give order, while women are to obey the order. If women were demeaned in the traditional African setting, they were relegated more in the colonial era. Women were perceived and treated as objects of service to the men. The burden of being a woman became heavier during the colonial period. While African men were carefully positioned by the colonial masters to play roles that were considered important to them, the women were only allowed to attend to some trivial matters like cooking, washing, cleaning and most importantly, bed warming of the colonial masters.

In Africa, some of the things that constitute barricade and create a boundary against women include preference for male children, harmful widowhood practices, child marriage, as well as odious cultural practices, repulsive attitude towards childlessness, false belief about menstruation, to mention a few. In the culture of some traditional African communities, a woman is regarded as unclean when she is menstruating. As a result, she is excluded from certain functions during that period. Bride price, female genital mutilation, denial of right to inherit property, and domestic violence (like battering) are also some of the oppressive acts against women. Rape (including sexual abuse of all forms) is also a painful act against women. Females (adult and children) are not expected to let anyone know when they are sexually abused under any circumstance, let alone when it happens under marital platform. This is because it is a part of the cultural beliefs of most

African communities that a woman does not have rights over her body; she belongs to a man (husband) who pays a bride price to acquire her as his property. As such, her husband has the right to treat her anyhow he likes; the treatment includes battering. African literary writers like Zulu Sofola, Vincent Egbuson, Buchi Emecheta, Safiya Yero, Abubaka Gimba, Mohammed Razinat among others use their works to chronicle women's experiences in patriarchal African society. They employ literature as a veritable tool of protest against culture, act or system that inflicts pains on women. Male preference, verbal abuse, battery, degrading widowhood rite, among others, are some of these acts and practices identified as tools of oppression against women in their works.

Male Preference and Women's Predicament in *Love My Planet*

Preference for male children is one of the thematic foci in the text under study. This act serves as a fracture on a life of a woman. Among the writers is Egbuson, who uses his work, *Love My Planet*, to totally debunk those false beliefs that are used as instruments of inferiorisation, objectification, discrimination, and oppression against women. It is not surprising that a male author from patriarchal African society explores preference for male children and its weighty implications on female children in their writings. This shows that men are aware of this societal anomaly. In the text, Wenni verbally abuses his wife, Larami, because she gives birth to only female children. As a result of this bias, he neither commends the good behavior, of his daughters nor their outstanding academic performances, for no other reason than that they are not boys, but girls. Toundi observes that her father:

Had never been excited seeing her results. He had always felt that the first position she had been taken didn't come through intelligence and hard work, but just because she was a girl, and though she was his own daughter he had often looked for the shaming manifestation of the consequences on her body, [to humiliate her] ... (82).

He makes his repulsion for female children obvious to his daughter, Toundi, the day she fights with a boy. When she comes home with bruises sustained in that fight, he reprimands her thus, "You, you who have no brother to fight for you, it is a boy you are fighting?" Toundi insists that the boy sustained more injuries in the fight because he lost one of his front teeth. Her father reminds her thus, "He lost one of his front teeth. When he sees you again, if he and his brothers gather together to beat you, how many of your back teeth will you lose? Who will help you? The brothers your mother cannot give you? You forget that you are from a house of women". (68) The father's expression of disgust for female children inflicted emotional injury on her, as this makes her to weep inconsolably. When her mother gets to know about her husband contemptuous comments about their female children, she tells Toundi the genesis of his father's negative acts towards them. She explains to her in the following excerpt that:

Her father had come home from his village union meeting smarting from the insult he had received from a fellow contestant for the post of president of Ogazza Improvement Union, Ajegunle, Nigeria Chapter. His rival had said he was better qualified for the position because all his children were boys – four boys and no girls and by the grace of God, one more was on the way, meaning that his pregnant wife would give him and Ogazza one more boy. It was that day her father started to hate her mother and her sisters and her" (69).

It is decipherable from the excerpt that Wennie's negative attitude towards his daughters is traceable to patriarchal prejudices inherent in African culture *which does not have regard for*

womanhood beyond procreation of male children. In such a male-centered world, men are horizontally at advantage and vertically at benefit. In such an environment, men are always at the centre of things and women are always at the edge; as a result, men are the centre of attraction and women are the point of distraction. It is in the course of their discussion that Toundi's mother reveals to her what she has been going through as a result of this cankerworm called male preference. She tells her that after her third child, she does not want to give birth again but the quest for a male child from her husband and the society pressurised her. What gives Larami the highest shock of her life is the reaction of her mother (Toundi's maternal grandmother). When she learnt from her daughter, Larami, that her marriage was being threatened because she has not given birth to a boy, she asks her, "Why do you not want to give him a boy? Give him a boy and let your marriage be happy" (85). The above statement gives a clear picture of the definition given to a happy marriage in such a society. From the response, the only thing that can guarantee a woman's happiness in a marriage is when such marriage produces male children and nothing less.

A Radical Feminist Voice in *Love My Planet*

Women's welfare is the common goal of feminism, irrespective of diverse views of its different proponents. Radical feminists totally reject injustice against women as well as seek to dismantle any form of structure that relegates women; they also seek to give womanhood a real definition. In Emenyonu's opinion, "the essence of African womanhood is indeed more than to procreate, listen and obey ..." (70). This is affirmed in the representation of a female character in the text. The protagonist is cast in a delightful mode in order to equip her with the fitness that is required for the consciousness-raising task of the liberation of women from the claws of hostile societal principles. Toundi is imbued with intelligence, diligence, confidence and audacity that are required to protest against oppressive system. Larami expresses fear of uncertainty about the sex of her unborn baby thus, "Oh let it be a boy. If not, I do not think I will live to see what it is" (85). Toundi's reactions to her mother's negative perception of self in particular and women in general, show a total rejection of false belief about women. She said, "I know to accept myself for what I am. I'm a woman. I'm proud" (85). Toundi's response is quite instructive; the woman's first step to initiating liberation is self-acceptance. The woman should not live her life based on the definition of other people about womanhood. She should give her personhood a definition that can carry the portrayal of the essentialities of humanity in a woman. Coming to terms with 'self', this study believes, is the first stepping stone to liberation of women and negotiating sustainable development in African society.

Preference for male children and rejection of such belief are some of the major issues that contribute to plot and character development in the novel. Larami is subjected to verbal assault by Wennie, her husband, before he pays the school fees of their daughters. The reason is not unconnected to the fact that they are not boys. Toundi non-violently confronts him for insulting her mother. Toundi's confrontational reaction to Wennie (who represents patriarchal culture and its concomitant effect on womanhood) shows her rejection of "... patriarchy and the oppressive demands it places on women by reducing femaleness to childbearing function" (Abiola, 501).

The confrontational reaction to her father, on the other hand, is indirectly targeted at individuals and institutions as well the society whose actions and inactions instigate gender-based oppression against women. Larami, who is emotionally unstable as a result of wrong perception of self and womanhood due to societal definition of and on the term 'woman', is artistically paired with Toundi, who lives her life on self-awareness, to illustrate the author's conviction on the close

connection between female agency and social change. Restoration of unity and peace in the family after Wennie accepts his female children for whom they are, demonstrates that acceptance of males and females is germane to peace in society. Sustainable development cannot be achieved in an environment that operates an unjust system against males or females. The initiation of sustainable development starts with initiation of peace at the family level where emotionally stable and psychologically balanced individuals are nurtured and in turn give back to the society. This point is demonstrated by Toundi when she recognises that she is “born to inspire” [others] (106). With this in mind, Toundi sets out to make positive impact on her world. One of such bold steps that were taken by her is using her article in *The People’s Word* to protest against:

Female genital mutilation, child marriages, harmful widowhood practices, the preference for male children, the bride price in Africa, the dowry system in India, women-degrading advertisements, catwalks and modelling exposing women’s breasts and legs, the use of the female body as a tourist attraction, the use of scantily dressed female cheerleaders in sports, honour killing in India, Iran and Iraq, honour suicide in Turkey, the absence of female governors in Daglobe, absence of female presidents in the history of Daglobe, and the androcentric use of language ... (265).

Toundi shows a genuine commitment to the struggle against oppression of women by using her article in another newspaper, *The Conscience*, to protest against inhuman treatment given to a “young woman who was burnt because she was not a man, whose case had not been investigated in order to determine the culpability of the police on that day, because the head of the police is not a woman” (320).

Toundi establishes a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) called Clean Daglobe, whose major aim is to meet societal needs through capacity building. Her belief that women’s roles are essential to positive societal development is clearly demonstrated through this act. With particular interest in championing women’s course, the educational and entrepreneurial needs of the people of Daglobe Delta were met by Toundi through the NGO. Through the NGO, she fights for changing some cultural practices that negatively affect women, thus aligning her action with the prescriptions of the radical feminists. One of such repulsive traditional practices is in Inoge community, where every first daughter of every family is mandated not to get married at all but stay in her paternal family house and bear male children for her father. One of the students of the Literacy Centre (the education wing of the NGO), a twenty-two-year-old woman tells Toundi how this repulsive custom has deprived her of her individuality (right to make choice of a marriage partner especially). Toundi decides to intervene through the NGO. She engages in consciousness-raising activities as a means of advocating a change. She embarks on educating the custodians of the culture of the need to get rid of such obnoxious customs that bring extra burden on women and set society backward.

The new Nigerian woman, through playing of roles that are significant to sustainable development of the society, demonstrates that she has renounced image of ‘a kitchen rat and a bedroom warmer’ to that of a world changer. This position is justified by the roles played by the female protagonist in the text. Women are doing successfully well in various fields of endeavours today; Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Director-General of the World Trade Organization, is a classic example. Toundi does not engage in advocacy against unjust system in her society by carrying placards. Rather, she deploys the ‘pen’ as a weapon against irresponsible leadership and its negative effects on the society. Toundi uses her article to launch an attack on the egocentric Daglobe Deltan leaders,

who on assumption of a leadership post, turn their backs at the masses and concentrate more on satisfaction of personal interest. The dilapidated state of structures in an educational establishment like Edota Boys and Girls Secondary School, is the evidence of the effect of bad leadership in Daglobe Delta in the text. It baffles Toundi that in Edota, one of the communities in Daglobe Delta, an area that serves as the economic power house of the town, students hold their lessons under trees because their classrooms are dilapidated. On a visit to the community, she

Saw a dilapidated sign board unashamedly announcing the name of the school: EDOTA BOYS AND GIRLS SECONDARY SCHOOL. The students under the trees were not relaxing – they were in class, each group of students sitting on wooden chairs, without desks, in front of the teacher who was backing a blackboard nailed to a tree. She saw the reason: two buildings were unusable; their roofs having fallen off and some of the walls broken (131).

Considering the economic worth of the crude oil whose extraction has plunged the region into a state of doom, one would expect a better living condition for the people, but the condition of the region is totally contrary to this expectation (the above deplorable condition of education system of Edota community is an example). It is disheartening that students hold their lessons under trees because of ramshackle classrooms in a region where one of the most lucrative mineral resources is exploited. These injustices spur Toundi into activism that is targeted toward achieving positive changes in the society. She protests against these using her article. The pen here is used as a metaphor for gun in the hand of the new Nigerian woman in particular, and the African woman in general, in initiating social change. She uses her article to fight corruption in Daglobe. In one of her articles in *The People's Word*, Toundi condemns:

The huge amounts public officials in Daglobe were fond of embezzling. She called them mindless amounts because, to her, they were amounts no human could use up in several lifetimes. Conceding that no amount or type of punishment could eradicate the evil, she appeals to her fellow Daglobans who had a mind to embezzle public funds to think of the possible profound effects of their actions on the country's little people (247).

In the above excerpt, the condition of the people of Daglobe Delta in the text is an allegory to the pathetic situation of the people of the marginalised region known as Niger Delta in Nigeria. It is an area that is ridden with poverty, insecurity, corruption, environmental degradation and other problems that were brought upon the people of the region by the exploitation of their crude oil.

In the text, a male activist known as Araba, and a female character, Toundi, are literarily juxtaposed to shrewdly address the 'woman being' question in order to rethink the perception of the term 'woman' in text and context. Araba establishes an activist group known as Simple Justice (SJ) to fight against injustices of oil companies in collaboration with the government. One of the activities of the group is to damage oil installation as a means of seeking attention of the oil companies to address environmental degradation and its unbearable consequences in the area. But Araba and his group are not rational enough to consider that such act contributes to polluting the environment the more. In order words, they are destroying what they claim to be fighting for. The male activists appear not to be rational enough to consider the consequences of their acts on the society. An intervention of a rational female character, Toundi, brings an answer to the 'woman being' question in Africa. She is reasonable enough to notice that SJ and other militant organisations through breakage of crude oil pipelines are:

... polluting and damaging the environment they said they are partly fighting for. Take the case of Ayere village where the people can no longer drink the water from the river or from underground following the destruction of the Zion 2 pipeline three times last month (334-335).

Toundi, having made the above observation, decides to intervene through the platform of her non-governmental organisation. She writes an appeal to SJ and other militant groups to persuade them to reconsider their approach in seeking justice for the Daglobe Delta, in order to dissuade them from activities that are impedimental to positive development in Daglobe Delta. However, this does not mean that Toundi is in support of unjust acts of oil companies towards the host communities, evident in her protest against pollution-related challenges caused by their oil exploitation activities in the region. By imbuing a female character with such mental stamina capable of positive change is truism to the significant role of the new woman to the effective management of the society.

Paradoxical placement of Araba (a man) and Toundi (a woman) side by side and their roles to the struggle in Daglobe Delta region in the text, a reader would inquire, "which of them makes more pronounced and influential impact in their society?" The answer is glaring; it is the woman, Toundi, as a result of her self-worth which reflects in the quality of impact made in her society. She astutely employs non-violent but radical strategies in solving societal problems and desired results were achieved, which Araba and his activist group (the men) could not achieve with their violent activism. It is very clear here that, being wise, intelligent, rational, reasonable, emotionally stable, resourceful, hardworking, managerial, considerate, kind, trustworthy, to mention a few, are normal good qualities that can be possessed by any human being, irrespective of 'sex'. The opposite of the above mentioned qualities can also be possessed by any individual (either a man or a woman). This study, therefore, contends that an individual should not be treated based on his or her sex but by the individual's worth to the society.

Conclusion

Love My Planet depicts women as agents of positive development in society. This authorial aim is made clear in the way the female protagonist is portrayed. Protest against acts and practices that provoke oppression against women and relegation of womanhood is conveyed through a radical feminist disposition of the chief female character in the text. This is to convey one important message: gender-induced acts and practices that relegate womanhood and stand as a barricade between the African woman and fulfillment of her destiny should be done away with, as radical feminists proposed. This study believes that by this, a better society where males and females would have equal chances to contribute their quota to sustainable development without sexist obstructions, would be born, and the woman's voice is significant to this birth through the instrumentality of literature.

Recommendations: Every human being (male or female), this study believes, possesses the capability to contribute something positive to the society. Any society that would record meaningful progress should avoid gender bias. This study, therefore, makes the following recommendations: (a) Individuals should not be treated based on being male or female but self-worth. In other words, sexism should be avoided because, it is not only injurious to the victim but also to the society that practices it. (b) All acts and practices that are detrimental to the development of African women should be obliterated. (c) African women, just like the female protagonist in the

novel, should get actively involved in the management of their various communities; their contributions are necessary for the society to move forward.

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