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Of Difficult Mothers and Rebellious Daughters: Investigating the Electra Complex in Contemporary Nigerian Feminist Fiction

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Abstract. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta and Lola Shoneyin are undoubtedly three of the most celebrated feminist novelists in the contemporary Nigerian literature. These three women-writers have one thing in common – each has written at least a novel in which she employs the usual problematic relations between a mother figure and a daughter as a means of exploring feminism – inflected issues such as identity-construction, subjecthood, and patriarchy, etc. I am making reference to Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. These novelists thematize in various ways albeit unconsciously the Electra complex. This paper argues that it seems something of a paradox that these women – novelists in engaging in feminist critiques of patriarchy, should to some extent appear to do so through the agency of the difficult relationship between a mother-figure and a daughter even when no psychological exploration in the delineation of these characters appears to be intended in these novels. The paper aims to draw attention to each of these writers' representation of certain aspects of the relations between the female protagonist of their respective novels, who appears to embody the novelist's feminist values, and her parents, especially to the uneasy tensions that seem to exist between them.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminism, The Electra Complex, The Symbolic Realm, The Unconscious

1. Introduction

Nigerian women writers have over the years been engaged in the feminist project of not only dismantling all patriarchal structures in society but also correcting certain phallocentric representations of women in Nigerian literature and in the process inevitably enriching what until recent times had been a marginalised presence of the female dimension in Nigerian literature. Since the early 2000s there has been an overwhelming preponderance of women writers entering the Nigerian literary field hitherto dominated by men. Some of the many noted women writers of this generation are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lola Shoneyin, Sefi Atta, Chika Unigwe, Ayobami Adebayo, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, etc. These women writers are currently defining the canon of contemporary Nigerian literature. They have not only continued the attempts of the first and second generations of Nigerian women writers such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta at unpacking and taking apart Nigerian culture in order to expose the ideological roots of women's oppression, they are also projecting in their novels provocative themes of sexuality and desire in ways that their predecessors would never have attempted in asserting their female identity and autonomy.

Scholars have noted in contemporary Nigerian feminist fiction a shift from the trends in the 1960s and 1970s in which women were represented in fiction as tangential to the historical process 'to a challenging reconfiguration of national realities in which the feminine is neither essentialized nor mythologized (Bryce). The female protagonists in the contemporary Nigerian fiction written by women are not represented as tragic victims of a patriarchal society as we have in Nigerian classical feminist texts of the past generation. These female protagonists are to a large extent self-actualizing characters who are

products of middle class backgrounds, educated and self aware. These women are autonomous and self-assertive, not constrained by societal and domestic realities; they are in fact moulders of contemporary Nigerian society. Jane Bryce has noted the celebratory impulse about the feminine animates the contemporary Nigerian fiction written by women.

It has been said of women writers generally that in their attempts at retrieving the feminine repressed, they tend to construct strong female characters in their fictional works. Contemporary Nigerian women fiction being unapologetically different from that of men, throws up certain images, patterns and dimensions that discerning (male?) perception cannot but notice. There can be no doubt that considerable psychological differences exist between men and women. These differences not only tend to show in their respective fictional works; they also matter. But to what extent can accounts of women identities in contemporary Nigerian fiction written by women be said to be consciously shaped to accomplish certain ends? As we know The meaning of a literary work does not reside in the writer's intentions alone; it also lies in its effect. How are we to deal with the dialectic interplay between an apparently intentional and consciously shaped work of art and certain psychic material that floats to the surface from the depths of the writer's unconscious during the process of writing?

The dilemma that literary scholars often face when adopting a psychological approach in studying a literary text is how to study the text without appearing to be delving into the writer's very private affairs. Should a literary text be studied as a reflection of the writer's life or should the study, as it seems appropriate, be confined to the life and times of the characters that inhabit the writer's fictive universe? Even if the latter approach is adopted, the scholar still stands the risk of reading or creating the impression to the reader that certain phenomena in the characters' psychosocial world are reflections of the writer's repressed experiences. Whietehead (2016) suggests that "the most appropriate way to pursue psychological literary criticism would be to understand an author's implicit informal personality theory and match it to the explicit formal theory with which it is most congruent, and then use that personality theory systematically as a lens through which to view the author's work" (4). In this paper I shall try to restrict myself to raising questions principally about the women who are written about and not necessarily about the women who write.

Arguably three of the most celebrated Nigerian women writers at the moment are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lola Shoneyin and Sefi Attah. These three women-writers have one thing in common – each has written at least a novel in which she employs the usual problematic relations between a mother-figure and a daughter as a means of exploring feminism – inflected issues such as identity-construction, subjecthood and patriarchy, etc. I am talking about Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Attah's *Everything Good Will Come*. It would seem something of a paradox that these women novelists in engaging in feminist critiques of patriarchy, should to some extent appear to do so through the agency of the difficult relationship between a mother-figure and a daughter even when no psychological exploration in the delineation of these characters appears to be intended in the novels. My aim in this essay is to draw attention to each of these writers' representations of certain aspects of the relations between the female protagonist of their respective novels, who appears to embody the novelist's feminist values, and her parents, especially to the uneasy tension that seems to exist between her and her mother compared to the relatively less problematic relationship that exists between her and her father.

In studying the subject of this nature, it is impossible not to evoke Freud together with one or two of his followers because he more than anybody else offers the most systematic account of the human mind; at least he was the first to draw our attention to the existence of the unconscious in all of us. Irrespective of the objections that have over the years been raised by scholars against a large chunk of his theory, his discovery of the unconscious is now generally accepted as an inevitable part of the human experience. Although his theories about the human mind are by now too well-known and familiar to necessitate a rehearsal of them here, a certain amount of recapitulatory reiteration is inevitable.

Basic to Freud's theory was his belief that the mind is mostly hidden. He likened our conscious awareness to the part of an iceberg that floats above the surface of the sea. Below the surface is much larger unconscious region seething with primitive wishes, drives and memories. This unconscious region he considered as central to human behaviour. These primitive drives and forbidden wishes powerfully influence the way we behave and what we do, even though we may not be aware of them. We repress these forbidden feelings and instincts into the unconscious but they do not stay permanently

repressed. They emerge despite us in altered and disguised forms in the beliefs we hold, in our daily habits, in the slips of the tongue and the pen, etc.

The unconscious, averred Freud defines our relationship with our parents. He posited that children pass through a series of psychosexual phases during which the Id's pleasure-seeking drives focus on certain pleasure-sensitive areas of the body. However the most important aspect of these drives in young children are directed towards the parent of the other sex. Freud named these drives Oedipal Complex after the Greek mythical hero who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. Freud also theorized about a different but analogous phenomenon in female children which his follower, Carl Jung named in 1913 the Electra Complex, also after a legend in Greek mythology whose hatred of her mother and adoration of her father have over the centuries provided writers with models for exploring in their fictional works the usual conflictual relationship between the mother-figure and her daughter. At the nadir of Freudian psychology in the 1950s Lacan revived it by reinterpreting some of its major concepts in structuralist terms. Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud's major ideas has almost been as important as Freud's discovery of the unconscious. The remainder of this paper shall be devoted to studying how Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Attah's *Everything Good Will Come* have in their different ways thematized albeit unconsciously the Electra complex in their respective novels.

Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun Half of a Yellow* is as much about the Biafran/Nigerian war and the degradations suffered by the Igbos in the war as it is about privileging the woman's point of view and experience. It is also about the clash between two generations but within the space of the family where the protagonist, Olanna and her twin sister, Kainene have a very problematic relationship with their parents. Adichie depicts the greed and shallowness of Olanna's parents, Chief and Mrs. Ozobia against the progressiveness and broadmindedness of their children.

While the Ozobias are hosting Chief Okonji, the country's finance minister to dinner who is clearly anxious to get Olanna into bed, their parents display their craftiness and oleaginousness towards the government functionary from whom they are anxious to get a government contract and would not mind prostituting their daughters for it. But the twin sisters' disapproval of their parents' behaviour seems to have a great deal more to do with their mother than with their father. Olanna whose perspective Adichie privileges, view their mother with a much more cynical and critical eye than she does her father as shown in the excerpt below from the novel:

"I hope you've thought about coming to join us at the ministry, Olanna. We need first-class brain like yours" Chief Okonji said:

"How many people get offered jobs personally from the finance minister" her mother said, to nobody in particular, and *her smile lit up the oval, dark-skinned face that was no nearly perfect, so symmetrical, that friends called her Art* (emphasis mine).

Though Adichie does not give as much attention to the delineation of Olanna's family as she does to the consequences of the war, the little glimpse we have of Olanna's family set-up seems to indicate that the interactions between the daughters and their mother seem bereft of any idyllic moments in which they are wrapped up in one another. On the contrary their relationship is characterised by ill-disguised tension and hostility. Nevertheless Olanna and her mother still manage to retain a cordial relation despite her acts of rebellion against her mother's wishes. We see this when her mother tries to dissuade her from moving to Nsukka to live with Odenigbo, a character she disapproves of as Olanna's lover:

(emphasis mine). *Olanna stared at the door. She was used to her mother's disapproval; it had coloured most of her major decisions, after all: when she chose two weeks' suspension rather than apologize to her Health grove form mistress for insisting that the lessons on Pax Britannica were contradictory; when she joined the students' movement for independence at Ibadan; when she refused to marry Igwe Okagbue's son, and later, Chief Okafor's son. Still, each time, the disapproval made her want to apologize, to make up for it in some way.* (35)

In spite of not sharing the same values at her mother, Olanna still desperately longs to retain a bond with her mother whom she wishes to see as a life model and counsellor, unlike her twin sister Kainene who has long detached herself from their mother and has begun to shape her own independent identity.

The mother and daughter conflict is even more intense and complicated in Sefi Attah's *Everything Good Will Come*; a coming of age story that offers a more expansive treatment of familial themes and provides a richly psychological mine for the exploration of all the dark childhood forces that shaped the protagonist's growing up. Right from the first few pages of the narrative, we are confronted with a barely concealed simmering tension between

the female protagonist and narrator, Enitan and her mother.

My mother never had a conversation with me; she talked and knew that I was listening. I always was. There mere sound of her footsteps made me breathe faster (23).

Enitan always appears to be on the edge in her mother's presence while her father's return from work always seems to excite her.

The door creaked open and snapped shut behind him. Bisi rushed to take his briefcase and he shoved her away. I smiled at my father. He was always miserable after work, especially when he returned from court. I pitied him whenever he complained (24).

Enitan leaves us with the impression that her father's always appearing miserable after his return from work has something to do with her mother's difficult behaviour. She can barely conceal her bias and sympathy for her father especially when they are having their usual quarrels.

One wrong word from my father could bring on my mother's rage. He was a wicked man. He had always been a wicked man. She would shout Bible passages at him. He would remain calm. At times like this, I could pity my mother, if only for my father's expression. It was the same as the boys in school who lifted your skirt and ran. They looked just as confused once the teacher got hold of their ears (26).

Enitan is quite closer to her father; she jokes and plays indoor games with him much to the jealousy of her mother who believes her husband is deliberately dividing this child and her. Enitan however appears to be pleased with the state of affairs between her parents. When a girl engages in psychosexual competition with her mother for her father's attention, a neo-Freudian psychoanalyst like Carl Jung would call it the Electra Complex. While Enitan is getting ready to leave for the boarding school to which she has been admitted, she knows she will miss her father terribly. She writes:

He was the one I would miss. The one I would write to. I settled to write a poem after he left, using words that rhymed with sad, bad, dad, glad, had. (44)

Though Enitan is already in her teens, long past the age that marks the child's entrance into the symbolic order which Jacques Lacan describes as the structure of language itself, this moment of her playing with rhymes on the subject of her father marks the crystallization of her long unconscious rejection of her mother. She tries to incorporate some of her father's characteristics into her personality. To her her father in contrast to her mother appears to be a figure of strength, calm, rationality and power. While in conversation with her friends she often loves to parrot her father's opinions and views.

Enitan's emotional attachment to her father disguises a subconscious libidinal attachment which neither she nor her parents are consciously aware of. Several years later while serving in the National Youth Service Corps, she would be brought into some awareness about this fact by her boyfriend Mike who accuses her of never talking about her mother. This accusation seems to have struck her profoundly. She writes:

I took another swig of the beer and wiped my mouth clean. A daughter was not meant to be at odds with her mother. Especially an only child. Thinking of my mother made me feel like I'd left the door of a vault wide open for thieves. (92)

Taking Mike's advice she goes to see her mother whom for a long while she has not seen but the visit turns out to be problematic; she ends up having an argument with her mother over her alleged preference for her father. Much later she is able to reconcile with her mother after she discovers her father has a son outside marriage. She undergoes a normal maturation process in which she realizes she shares the same gender with her mother and she is able to appreciate how difficult her mother's life has been living a patriarchally conditioned environment.

The most difficult of mother and daughter relationships in the three novels under the review is clearly the one between Bola, the protagonist of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and her mother. Right from when they were children Bola and her sister, Lara had always resented their mother, and adored their father who appeared to have tacitly encouraged their open hatred of their mother.

When we were children, he liked to amuse himself by making us articulate our hatred for things using new words. I loathe bread and despise onions" I would say. Lara would follow with "I just don't like Mama at all", which made my father fall over laughing (173).

As the two sisters grew up, their animosity towards their mother (whom they accused of endless nagging) increase Bola so resents her mother that instead of sympathizing with her mother's frequent miscarriages, she feels the unborn babies are lucky not to have been born alive. Hear her:

May be they heard her relentless nagging and decided it was better to be born unformed. I must have covered my ears when I was in her womb. Perhaps she was quieter then. (15)

The relationship between Bola and her mother is so full of tension and anxieties that the little occasional intimacies they show each other seem to come with pain.

...Before I left, Mama gave m a firm one-arm embrace. It was awkward because I couldn't remember when she'd ever held me with tenderness. There always seemed to be pain involved when she touched me so the feel of her arm on my back, the warmth of her cheek against mine was memorable in its own way. (152)

Bola's family is dysfunctional home in which tension and resentment seem to be the prevailing note; there is a barely disguised tension between their parents, between the sisters and their mother and between Bola and her sister. The children however feel relaxed in their father's presence and even display some affection for him however vague compared to their hostility toward their mother. Bola describes this vague affection between her and her father during a visit to her parents' home after her marriage to Baba Segi. She writes:

We walked indoors, arms linked, and I thought how unfamiliar it felt to be close to him. The smell of him didn't conjure any fond memories. Gin had stolen Baba from our childhood and when there wasn't any, he did what he did best; he escaped. (174)

Their father's little involvement with the two sisters did not seem to dampen their enthusiasm for him. He is missed and lamented in his absence. They long for his presence always and concort fantasies about him coming to deliver them from their mother's constant naggings. But it never happened.

Every time Mama beat us when we were younger Lara and I prayed for him to come to our rescue and ward off Mama's palm but he would look away, unable to watch. We fantasied about him standing up to her and warning her never to inflict pain on his children, but it never happened that way. Baba would issue a quiet cautionary word and vanish... (176)

Eventually Bola flees the tyrannies of her mother and enters into an unfortunate marriage with Baba Segi, a man much older than she. Her desertion of young suitors, and her deliberate blindness to the factual reality of Baba Segi being not only already married but also much older than she is revelatory of her unconscious childhood fantasies to have a father figure as husband, especially one that is representative of the disappearing traditional family system where order, warmth and stability are the norms. She writes:

So, yes. I chose this home. Not for the monthly allowance, not for the lace skirt, and not for the coral bracelets. Those things mean nothing to me. I chose this family to regain my life, to heal in anonymity. And when you choose a family, you stay with them. You stay with your husband even when friends call him a polygamist ogre (16).

Bola finds in Baba Segi a substitute father whom she describes as "a large but kindly generous soul". Bola is the kind of daughter Carl Jung describes as one "who knows what she does not want but is usually completely at sea as to what she would choose as her own fate. All her instincts are concentrated on the mother in the negative form of resistance and are therefore of no use to her in building her own life. Should she get as far as marrying, either the marriage will be used for the sole purpose of escaping from her mother or else a diabolical fall will present her with a husband who shares all the essential traits of her mother's character" (25). But Bola's choice of Baba Segi as husband has clearly something to do with her unconscious libidinal fascination with her father, not just for the fact that Baba Segi represents certain traits that her mother seems not to have.

All the three maternal figures in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Sefi Attah's *Everything Good Will Come* and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* are almost constructed as the monstrous-feminine to use Barbara Creed's phrase despite their difficult lives. The conflictual relationship between the mother and the child is not seen from the mother's point of view. The mother is hardly portrayed sympathetically as a subject whose gender confines her to a marginal existence in the symbolic realm according to Lacanian psychology. The child struggles to break free of her mother but the mother is unwilling to let her go because the mother and child relation is the only thing that authenticates her existence, "an existence which needs validation because of her problematic relation to the symbolic realm (Barbara Creed). The mother experiences double objection because of "her difficulty" in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm – in other words, the problems she has with the phallus that her father or husband stands for – is not such as to help the future subject (the child) leave the natural mansion. Julia Kristeva quoted in Barbara Creed (2008, p. 248).

On the other hand all the three fathers in the novels under review, though have their own individual traits, share some things in common – they are freer being of a gender representative of the symbolic realm, and yet share one thing in common – have a placid temperament in relation to their wives, and seem to

have ceded the authority of the home to them. They are almost invariably absent from home, not only physically but emotionally as well. And yet their daughters seem to find them likeable. They appear to permit their father's philandering and drinking and even justify them on account of what they perceive as the difficult attitudes of their mothers. Their fathers in turn appear to be lax and permissive with them.

2. Conclusion

There is no doubt that Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Attah's *Everything Good Will Come* and Shoneyin's *The secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* are three of the most celebrated feminist texts in contemporary Nigerian fiction that not only privilege femininity and the woman's way of viewing the world but also seek to renegotiate gender power dynamics in all spheres of life in Nigeria. The female characters in these novels are strong-willed, middle-class characters who in their various ways try to fight male hegemony in society, and yet are unable to totally wean themselves from their childhood libidinal attachment to their fathers in which they appear to idealize and privilege their fathers at the expense of their long-suffering mothers. What this underscores from a psychological point of view is that these female protagonists are very complex and realistically presented characters that go beyond the usual rhetoric of empowered female characters serving as authorial mouthpieces in feminist texts. These female characters are as true to life and unidealized as they can be, confronted with female challenges in a patriarchal world.

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