

# A Feminist Analysis Of Song Texts In Okun Yoruba Marriage Ceremony

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## **Abstract**

*The work investigates the feminist aspect of song texts during Okun Yoruba marriage ceremony in Nigeria. Women perceive the ceremony as an avenue to challenge oppression in a patriarchal society. Knowing that economic independence is a means to women liberation from the oppressive mode in such society, they encourage in their songs the need for women to work hard and be self-actualized. The songs are therefore analysed thematically to depict the significance of women in a patriarchal society like Nigeria.*

## **Introduction**

Feminism is a struggle against oppression through which feminist writers communicate the working of oppressive ideology within the realistic narratives. It is the struggle for identity in a patriarchal society where feminists write to challenge gender inequality and identity in the western world. Such struggle started with pamphlets that introduced the rights of women in the society and later to theatrical works where fewer feminist concerns were dramatized with fewer audiences reached. Such feminist playwrights then “like the women they often depicted might be left unheard as they spoke softly themselves at the margins of their culture.” (Schroeder, 1999:164) However, they were not daunted by such neglect but continued to search for such performance that “deconstructs sexual difference and thus undermines patriarchal power and the production that presents transformation as a structural and ideological replacement for recognition.” (Keyssar, 1999:1)

In realization of the input of feminists to the change in social structure in a patriarchal society, women have come together to build on the ladder of change in their various ways toward societal growth. Socialist feminism is therefore my focus in this paper as it explores women both as individuals and as social and political forces in the okun-yoruba context of Nigeria. Socialist feminism has to do with two central ideological issues of class oppression and sexual repression. Reinelt, in support of socialist feminism claims that “historically, women have been subject not only to the ruling class ,but also to the patriarchy” (Reinelt, 1999:36) Socialists believe that the real oppression stems from capitalism and in addition to their struggle against patriarchy women must not abandon their historical place in the struggle against capitalism by engaging in what is tagged bourgeois liberal movement This type of movement can be in any form as long as it achieves the desired change from every form of oppression

Women in okun-yoruba of Nigeria also have similar experiences like other women in patriarchal and classic societies. They are also oppressed economically and repressed sexually. However, they find solace in traditional marriage ceremony whenever it comes up for it gives them room to checkmate women’s illicit acts and depict the significance of

women in the society as expressed in their songs and costumes. Marriage ceremony is portrayed as an act that brings women close to the high class in the society since it is only performed by those who have the means. Some of the songs also portray women as queens in the society when they are married and not just objects to be used and dumped.

Okunland is located along Lokoja- Ilorin Road, on the way to the northern part of Nigeria. It shares boundaries with other States like Ondo, Ekiti and Kwara. Geographically, Okunland is mainly a forest area with fairly accommodating weather and it is densely populated. The people are greatly influenced by their condition of dry and rainy seasons. They have cash crops like cocoa, coffee, tobacco and fruits although the seasonal fluctuation influenced the demand for their agricultural produce. For instance, the rainy season is the period of plenty of farm produce while the harmattan season is known with scarcity when the people have little to feed on.

Culturally and socially, Okun people share common features with Yoruba speakers. Their mode of dressing, manners of salutation and interactions are the same. Also the systems of festivals and ceremonies of which marriage ceremony is one are closely related. The difference lies in the composition of songs, the tune and the costumes. The people are referred to as Okun- Yoruba speakers because there is mutual intelligibility between the two languages that every Okun child invariably speaks Yoruba language without any formal education or any form of mixture or identification with a Yoruba speaker.

Culture according to (Halkes, 1991:11) is “a process of giving shape and meaning by which humanity surpasses the data of natural existence, transcends it, bends it to its own purposes and dominates it in service of its interests.” Therefore, marriage ceremony as part of Okun culture is transcended and bent as a rite of passage for a woman to enter into adulthood. It is defined in different ways by different individuals or groups. In some societies, a man and a woman are considered husband and wife if they have had sexual relations that resulted in procreation. Some also believe that bride price must be paid before a conjugal relationship can be established. (Schneider, 1981: 88) asserts that payment of bride price “gives the man exclusive rights to the woman and permits him to place his son in his descent group.”

However, traditional marriage in Okunland establishes a system of social relationship and so sets up social roles and values in the society. It is a system that unites women and gives them the power to speak on issues concerning their welfare in songs. So, it is perceived by women as “an appropriate and powerful vehicle for staging feminist issues” (Schroeder, 1999: 164). Through marriage ceremony in Okunland, women develop and encourage their own separate tradition in marriage so as to reach their audience in the dominant tradition. They come together “to exalt values and experiences considered to be feminine or women-center, criticizing the exploitation of women in patriarchy.” (Miller, 1999:232).

### ***The Thematic Analysis Of The Songs***

The aesthetics of Okun-Yoruba marriage ceremony is mainly depicted in the costumes of the bride and the songs that her friends sing as they lead her to her husband's house. Edmund Burke analyses aesthetics to be “the uniformity, regularity or symmetry, which is only beautiful when it helps to preserve the character of fitness.” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/aesthetics>). Most of the songs are feministically inclined as they portray the significance of female gender in a patriarchal society. This comes up immediately after the payment of the bride price. The bride dresses in a special woven cloth that cannot be found on anyone but her. The woven cloth symbolizes unity between the

couple to mean that once they are joined, it is like being woven together and they must remain so until 'death do them part'. Part of her dressing includes 'Iyun' – coral beads and 'ileke' – beads that are put around the neck and the waist to make her stand out among the crowd. There is 'Agborun iyao' - bride's umbrella, which is used to prevent her from the heat of the sun, it also symbolizes protection from all evils in the new home.

Among the items carried by the bridal train is her stool, which has the same format anywhere in okunland and it guarantees her permanent stay in her husband's home. Other items are sets of plates and dishes arranged in a sack and a box of clothes. The number of things carried depends on how wealthy the family is or on how good the bride is. If she is nice to all, neighbours and relations will give her enough gifts to take to her new home. Her hair is also plaited in 'Suku' style with a lot of decoration to distinguish her own 'Suku' among others.

The procession is beautiful and interesting. It is a performance where people sing and dance to the rhythm of the drum, which according to Olatunji (1989:181) "generates social cohesion that is expressed in dances by members of the audience." This type of dance that follows is always gives a deep sense of pleasure to the dancers and the spectators. The aesthetics of this performance is stressed with significance. Aesthetics as described by Scott (1951:6) is "the study of the beauty in nature and art of its character, of its condition and of its conformity to law." So the dual purpose of African aesthetics as it is realized in the songs, dance, costumes, and musical accomplishment is to entertain and to educate the people in their own language. The aesthetics and feministic nature of the songs are also portrayed in their thematic repetition, symbolism and structural repetitions as will be discussed below.

In okun traditional setting, marriage is perceived as a crown, which any female prays to wear one day. Some of the marriage songs which refer to this aspect of marriage as a special crown that must be worn are:

Aisa gbo gidigidi	-	We are just hearing loud sound.
Moin Kainse	-	I demanded for what they are doing.
Ain Lalonpe omo Baba	-	They said Lalounpe, Baba's child.
Ri joye alade	-	is being crowned.

The song has its rhythm in the repetition. There is skilful use of alliteration of the /g/ and /n/ sounds in 'gidigidi' and 'moin kain'. Other traditional marriage songs that present the bride as her majesty include.

Boya boya ni won wi)	-	can it ever be is their thought.
Alasara ade gori re ) 2ce	-	Asara's child, you are now crowned.
Kade orire ma ma ye	-	May the crown not shake
Kade orire mamasi	-	May the crown not be removed.
Boya boya ni won wi	-	Can it ever be is their thought.
Alasara Adegori re	-	But Alasara you are crowned.

This song confirms the authenticity of the crown of marriage on the bride's head. Another of such songs that presents the bride as the crowned queen is :

Pempe pemperipe	-	Come and see o.
Amo lori dode	-	We have brought the queen out.
Oriloye aderewa	-	Your destiny is for crowning beautiful one

Many are not fortunate enough to wear this crown, but this bride is among the fortunate ones. This brings about the song that says;

Oriloye Aderewa - Your destiny is for crowning beautiful one.  
Oriloye Omo Oba - You are lucky dear princess.  
Oriloye - It is your luck.

There is thematic repetition of the crown in each of the songs to emphasize that crown here symbolizes marital title. There is also prayer for permanency of this crown on the bride's head. The song is metaphorically expressed to mean that marriage is ordained in heaven and actualized on earth. Also this notion of a woman being a queen emphasized to checkmate the possibility of being maltreated by her would-be husband. A queen in any society connotes integrity and commands respect from all and sundry, so she is expected to be treated so in her new home

Some of the marriage songs are thematically satirical. This is to satirize the lazy ones who cannot strive to perform the rites and to encourage hard work for self actualization among women. They are also used to ridicule those who are impregnated before the wedding day to affect marital sanctity. Some of these songs are:

- i. Leader:- Iyao idigba - The bride is getting prepared  
Ole iwode - while the lazy one looks on  
Chorus: - Oje se - If it is that easy.  
Ole ma se - The lazy one will have her way too.
- ii. Gbeyo gbeyo - Success, success,  
Omo gbeyo - you have succeeded  
Arilewo mogbe - the poor tried it  
O gbeti - and failed.  
Fehintolu mogbeyo - She has proved superiority  
Onigbajumo - She is the precious one.
- iii. Erin goke lo - The elephant has climbed up.  
Omo goke loo - It has climbed,  
Agunfon - To blow its whistle.  
Erin goke - The elephant has climbed up.

In the first song, the lazy ones who cannot work hard to save enough money for the occasion are satirized. Such women move to their husbands' houses unceremoniously and are treated like slaves because they fail to wear the crown and may have to depend on their husbands for their needs. In the last one, the elephant is personified as the bride who has climbed to the top of the ladder to blow the success of her wedding to all and sundry. The allusion to the elephant and its internal comparison of her success are for aesthetic effects. Her majestic move like that of an elephant is to further encourage decency and pride in womanhood.

Also during courtship, elders as being wayward when found alone with her fiancé perceive the bride. But these songs are used to stress the significance of courtship as a means of strengthening the union after marriage. It is to also discourage the act of match making by parents which at the end the woman is at the receiving end with all forms of maltreatment from a marriage that is not based on mutual love. The song below is an example;

Olalonpe gha - Our dear Olalonpe,  
Omo Barnabas - Child of Barnabas,  
Ighan roi se - These were your whims  
Anfoi ta morole – Which they termed idleness,  
Eke ri morole - you now see idleness.  
Bose yori pegede - Resulting clearly in marriage.

If such courtship results in pregnancy, such friend will also be ridiculed in their songs in their songs to check fornication among young girls. An example is the case of Wuraola:

Oni aba ponponpon - she who should have been praised,  
Oni aba gegege - she who should have been cherished.  
Oni aba Fadamo - she who should have been royally,  
Gberele oko - Led to her husband's house  
Omo ra soyun o - Has been put in the family way,  
Iwuraola oe - Iwuraola o.

Such people are not spared as their names are mentioned for bringing shame to their parents and for distorting the societal cosmic value. The performance of okun traditional marriage gives the bride's family and friends such joy that makes them behave as if they are drunk. Such impression is given in this song;

Abosede digi araba - Abosede has become a very big tree.  
Ipam bi temu - Intoxicating me like palm wine  
Kinkin – kin kin (sound).

There is simile that compares her greatness on that day to a big tree, which no one can easily uproot. 'Kinkin', the chorus of the song is rhythmic. Such comparison is unlimited as they appreciate her patience for waiting for that day without getting pregnant. She is also compared to the moon, which shines round the whole world since in a similar way her traditional marriage attracts all and sundry. This is also to assert that a woman can shine like the moon if given the opportunity.

D' osupa a - She has become like the moon.  
Omo d' osupa o - She has become like the moon.  
Omo Bola d' osupa - Omobola has become like the moon.  
On tan bi rawo, - Shining like the star.

D' osupa is repeated to give a rhyme scheme and to depict the fact that the bride is surely brightening the day and the world with her gaiety. Some of the songs function as a piece of advice to the bride so as to encourage lasting and happy marriage. Such songs are;

Iyao o - Dear bride,  
Akun etoran - Weeping will not help,  
Ma bo ko lo - follow your husband.  
Iya o! - Dear bride.  
Ile iya ejole oko - Your mother's house is different  
from our husband's house.  
ii. Rora mehin tele - Watch your steps,

- |      |                  |   |                                    |
|------|------------------|---|------------------------------------|
|      | Ainme mabinu oni | - | For no one knows who the enemy is. |
| iii. | Iyao o           | - | Dear wife,                         |
|      | Ile oko dun      | - | There is joy in being married.     |
|      | Ma morilo.       | - | Just go with character.            |

The bride is advised with the message of these songs on what to do to have a happy home. One of such is that her parent's home should never be compared to that husband for they are two different places. The songs are repeated to make the performance rhythmic. The friends and wives of the males in her extended family are not left out as they express emotionally and with regret the gap that her absence will create among them. They then lead her with these songs:

- |    |                     |   |                                 |
|----|---------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| i. | Iya o               | - | Dear bride,                     |
|    | Ile oko dun         | - | Your husband's house is sweet,  |
|    | Ma be elo           | - | I will go with you.             |
|    | On lo               | - | As she goes,                    |
|    | Odiroju fawa aya re | - | It becomes hard for us to bear. |

Another song from the wives is the one that expresses how much she is appreciated within her family;

- |     |                  |   |                          |
|-----|------------------|---|--------------------------|
| ii. | Ono gboko        | - | He who marries           |
|     | Timo nio         | - | the husband that I have. |
|     | Afi kopawapo gbe | - | Has to marry both of us. |

At a stage, they will refuse to move especially if they are not receiving enough attention from the groom's family. This song then follows;

- |  |                 |   |                                |
|--|-----------------|---|--------------------------------|
|  | Omi mo Kun      | - | The river is over flown.       |
|  | Eyan ni ha ko a | - | Send people to take us across. |

'Husband' here, symbolically means that the bride belongs to the women's husbands' clan. This and similar ones are sung at the entrance of the groom's house to cunningly extract money from the groom's family before the bride is finally released. The actions and reactions of these 'wives' are dramatic and they won't stop singing and dancing until the amount they are given is acceptable to them. They shake their heads to mean rejection and nod to show approval. It also emphasises the worth of the bride among her family members As this goes on, members of the husband's family will also be singing to antagonize theirs but not without paying for what they are given. One of such is:

- |  |                         |   |                                   |
|--|-------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
|  | Emu yao koni ya o (2ce) | - | Give the bride to the owner.      |
|  | Ile isu ran             | - | It is getting dark                |
|  | Ile oko ri sile obirin  | - | The husband's home is the bride's |
|  | Emu ya o koni yao       | - | Give the bride to the owner.      |
|  | Ile isu ran             | - | It is getting dark.               |
|  | Eba mi a yo             | - | Rejoice with me.                  |

The first line is given thematic repetition to remind bride's 'wives' that they don't have a choice but to release her before it gets dark. When finally the bride is released, the theme of the songs changes to acceptance and gladness from the husband's family. Songs are rendered to claim ownership of the bride and to mock bride's 'wives' who will now return home empty handed.

- |     |                     |   |                                   |
|-----|---------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| i.  | Oni un gba un rin   | - | The owner has taken his thing,    |
|     | Hi a gba            | - | Yes, he will take it,             |
|     | Ibo ti ni un rin    | - | Because he is the owner.          |
| ii. | Oni roka gbiro roka | - | The owner has claimed his ring    |
|     | Owo awe do fifo     | - | Their friend's hand is now empty. |

The rituals at the entrance of the groom's house are to usher the bride into a peaceful home. This is the washing of her feet to purify her of any odds and it is done by a wife from the husband's clan. A clay pot is used to touch her head three times after which it is broken into pieces. This means all ill luck that might have followed her from home has been destroyed. The pot first touches the ground three times to confirm the belief in the three-fold cord that cannot be broken in African context. Animals are not left out of the rituals, so, before the wedding day, an oracle would have been consulted to know which animal would be the bride's guide in her husband's house. Animals like sheep, dove or snail can be chosen for the bride by the oracle. The sheep here symbolizes patience, the dove gives her peace and the snail symbolizes peace and satisfaction. Such brides will for life rear whatever animal her god chooses for her. She is then handed over to her predecessor 'Iyale' who will take care of her during the period of seclusion.

### **Conclusion**

On the whole, most of the songs rendered during traditional marriage have in them allusions to places or events, personification of objects, symbolism, alliteration and repetition for aesthetic effect. The aesthetics of the traditional marriage is mainly in the performance because it is from there that attention is drawn to the elements of songs, dance and costuming. The ritual becomes dramatic through performance, thus, portraying the beauty of the ceremony. Thus, Echeruo (1973:26), asserts the components of aesthetic values being "the content (themes) the form (plot, characterizations, setting) and other aesthetic values such as personification, symbolism, allusions, songs, dance and poetry".

Okun-yoruba traditional marriage as portrayed in this work takes a long process but it usually ends well. It is more stable than any other type of marriage and the stability is enhanced by the procedures it passes through.

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