

A Narrative of Identity in Marcan and Franco-African Womanist Study

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ABSTRACT—Womanist ideological orientations have been highlighted in many African narratives in French expression written by both male and female authors. Equally, in Marcan narratives, womanist postures are entrenched in the relationship between Jesus and women as opposed to representations of women's marginalization and oppression found in the Jewish culture. Literature is a vital tool for articulation and interpretation of events, realities and aspirations of women in particular in the society. Marcan's account of the Anointing Woman at Bethany and Haemorrhaging Woman are interrogated to bring out womanist orientations while novels of Adelaïde Fassinou (a new generation of Francophone African writer) and Henri Lopes (old generation of Francophone writer) are analysed to highlight the womanist tendencies adopted by female characters for the purpose of comparing it with Marcan womanist inclinations in order to foreground that women's experiences in patriarchal setting are similar. This was done to emphasise the fact that women should not feel intimidated with the dominance of men in the mission field, rather they should make all efforts to make their calling and election sure.

Keywords: Womanism, Patriarchal culture, Women in mission.

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I. Introduction

Tradition is one
Culture is one
Initiations are one
Though outward manifestations of customs
May vary, the practical situations to which
They refer, are the same everywhere.

Hampate Bâ (1978, p.22)

Undoubtedly, political, socio-economic, cultural and religious domain all smack of patriarchal context. Women are hemmed in at every turn by the iron bars and fetters of gender discriminations politically, academically, legally, culturally just to mention but few. They are portrayed as sex objects. They are categorized as subordinates and constricted to a corner of the men's world. They are confined by structures, cultures and rules invented by men to maintain the privilege and pleasure of men. However, women have been organising themselves around issues relating to this seemingly gender imbalance in order to achieve both equity and equality. Their struggles birthed a lot of ideologies of which womanism is one.

II. Womanism

Womanism, which is the theoretical framework employed in this paper, is relevant to this study in the sense that it justifies the womanist ideological stance of the selected writers who embrace the womanist ideological orientations in the narratives under study. Womanism as defined by Walker, transcends the domain of the Feminism of the Western woman. It embraces the idea of enhancing stronger relationships between women and men. Walker describes Womanism as a universalist ideology which is *committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female*. Walker (1984, p.ix).

Womanism is an avenue for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men, contrary to Feminism which is viewed by white women as a movement exclusively for women used as a medium of attacking and eliminating men. Thus, Womanism brings a racialized and often class-located dimension to the gendered experience suggested by Western feminism. It reflects a link with history that includes African cultural heritage, enslavement,

women's culture, and a kinship with other women of colour (Shodipe:2008,p. 244 -245). Thus, the Womanism of the African feminist is an epitome of afrocentricity that encourages gender complementarity (Acholonu, 1995, p.107)

As an ideology, Womanism is the black woman's intellectual framework that articulates her standpoint on self, community and society. It is committed to forging positive self-definition, self-reliance and independence that is capable of fighting racial and sexist oppression.

Ogunyemi's (1988)'s own dimension to the definition of Womanism, it is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the idea of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womanhood. It emphasizes the difference between Black Feminism (Womanism) and Western Feminism. She accuses the proponents of Western Feminism of promoting separation between the two sexes in order to fuel a breakdown in communal living. She describes Western Feminism as "rhetorical, polemical and individualistic". It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussles as with the whole power structure that subjugates black. She defines Womanism as a global ideology for African women embracing racial, gender, class and cultural consciousness. She says:

Black Womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, their ideas of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womanhood. It concerns itself much with the black sexual power hassle as with the world power structure that subjugates Blacks. Ogunyemi (1988, p.5)

Recognizing African cultural idiosyncrasies, one of which is the fact that the family unit is the bedrock of other social relations, some African women have given tags like 'Black feminism or African Feminism to the struggles of African women against patriarchy. However, the word Feminism with whatever tags attached to it makes them unacceptable still.

A further reading of Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1983) shows her classic definition of Womanism, as it portrays racial focus and specificity. Walker (1983,p.70)

To give credibility to Walker's definition, Madhu Dubey, according to Kolawole (1997,p.24) says:

The term Womanism coined by Walker... as an attempt to integrate Black nationalism into feminism... shares ... the objective of black nationalist ideology.

Women centered ideologies and theories all have the same desire to see that women are free from all manner of oppression. They desire the end of patriarchy; advocate the realistic portrayal of women in literature, documenting women's struggle for survival and self-esteem in patriarchal societies. Women centered theories attack the stereotypic image in literature. They reject male tendency to portray women as temptresses, witches and dull unintelligent beings. Women critics advocate a portrayal that would depict the woman in her strengths and weaknesses. Women theories therefore encourage a re-reading of literary works. Works of both female and male writers are examined, analyzed, assessed and reassessed against the backdrop of highlighting the experiences of oppressed women in the society. The unwholesome portrayals of women are used as tools to reveal the marginalization and dehumanization of women.

The womanists celebrate works, where positive attributes, achievement and contributions are depicted. These works help in the empowerment of women. Thus, literature serves as a powerful instrument in the negation of many false beliefs and myths about women which have been propagated through oral and written literature.

III. Women in Mark

A. The Anointing Woman at Bethany (Mark 14:3-9)

“And while he was at Bethany in the in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. But there were some who said to them indignantly, “Why the ointment was thus wasted? ... but Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me... she has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is

preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.’ (Mark 14:3-9 RSV).

In Matthew, Mark and John, the anointing took place at Bethany, while in Luke it was just a city (no name). The only real link between Mark and Luke is that the Pharisee’s host in both accounts is named Simon. Matthew and Luke have a minor agreement against Mark in their description of the woman’s action. Mark said the woman broke the alabaster *flask* (*συντριψασα την αλαβαστρον κατεχεεν*) but Matthew (26:7) reads, a woman came in with a beautiful alabaster jar of expensive perfume and poured it on his head (*καικατεεν επι της κεφαλης*, while Luke simply recorded that she anointed him (*και ηλειφεν τω μυρω*). In essence both Matthew and Luke omitted the breaking of the alabaster (*συντριψασα την αλαβαστρον*). Mark in his usual manner of giving vivid description of events must have added these words which others viewed as redundant. In both Matthew (26:6-13) and Mark, the woman is unnamed and she anointed Jesus’ head. Whereas John (12:1-8) identifies the woman as Mary of Bethany, who, as a faithful friend of Jesus, shows her love by anointing his feet; Luke (7:37-38) shifts the focus of the story from the woman as a disciple or friend to the woman as a sinner. In the process the woman became a great sinner who was forgiven by Jesus because of the deep consciousness of her sinfulness and her grateful love toward Christ which she expressed by washing his feet with tears and anointing his feet with very expensive ointment. All four gospels however, agree that a woman anointed Jesus, that the incident caused objections from both the disciples and other males present but Jesus approved of the woman’s action, an account that highlights complementarity and demands no separate space between the male and the female in the society. In the Old Testament, the head of a King was anointed (II Kings 9:1-13; I Sam. 10:1), thus it has been suggested that the royal dignity of Jesus is being implied by the woman’s gesture.

Tolbert (1992, p.270) observed that though the act of anointing the head with oil was a widespread rite in the ancient Near East signifying the selection for some special role or task, Jesus did not interpret the woman’s action explicitly in this manner rather he said that she was anointing his body beforehand for burying. We agree with this view because the woman innocently came with the oil to anoint Jesus in appreciation of the pardon she had received which was worth more than 300 denarii and to honour the Saviour with the best

she could offer. The woman's action portrayed exceptional humility and love for the male folk which womanism advocates.

Some scholars however believed that the woman showed deep spiritual insight because she was the only one in Mark's gospel prior to the cross who understood that Jesus' messiahship must mean his suffering and death (Mitzi 1991, p.136). Thiemann (1987, p.56) argues that this unnamed woman at Bethany functions symbolically to signal the expansion of the category of discipleship, precisely as she inaugurates Jesus' passion, making disciples of all nations" thereby believing in the survival of all community members..

The woman is therefore treating his living body to the gentle ministrations and loving care his dead corpse will never receive and he is grateful for this. *She has done what she could*, she could not save him from death, what is possible is a loving gesture to help him face it. Mark's precise vocabulary also deepens the theological import of the story. The woman brought the oil in an *αλαβαστρον*, alabaster vase – an expensive container which indicates that it is not an ordinary oil. "For it might have been sold for more than three hundred pence" (verse 5). A working man earned one denarius a day, this luxury import was worth nearly a year's wages (Alexander 1973, p. 509). This was an extraordinary piece of respect paid him by a good woman who thought nothing too good or expensive to bestow upon Christ who represents the male and to do him honour in a lavish, extravagant gesture of affection.

Jesus however did not deny that the proceeds from the sale of the ointment could have been "given to the poor" (verse 5), the problem is that they could not see beyond the level of good works (almsgiving) to the deeper implications for life and conduct of devotion to Jesus in the woman's action. This breaking and pouring out in the house of Simon the leper is linked to the breaking and pouring out of the Passover meal - actions which in turn are linked to the breaking of Jesus' body and the pouring out of his blood. In the whole of Mark's passion narrative, the woman's anointing of Jesus is the only gesture of faith (Sabin 2000,p.5). The woman, because of her prophetic action, her insight into the reality of suffering, and her courage, received from Jesus the most positive pronouncement as recorded in Mark. "And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mk. 14:9). This pronouncement suggests that in some future time she will be remembered as Jesus' death is remembered, because the re-enactment of his death will also be a re-

enactment of her acts of breaking and pouring; her gestures enacted the eucharistic remembrance (Sabin 2000,p.5).

She lost neither her oil nor her labour, she got instead that good name which is better than precious ointment. She acted on her spiritual insight and understanding despite the sharp criticism that came from the men at the table who did not understand her motive. She exemplified better than anyone else the dedication that all followers of Christ should have, her act was the expression of her deep devotion and profound love for the Master.

It is also important to note that Jesus broke through the taboo of all the purity laws that were intended to defend political, social, and religious integrity but were in fact often utilized as a device to keep the established power structure of both gender safe (Kinukawa, 1994, p.89). He did not condemn the woman for touching his head. Jesus physical proximity to the woman did not make him unholy. He did not see in the action of the woman, anointing his head with oil, an attempt to lure him into immorality. He did not see the woman touching his head as an agent of the devil sent to pull him down. Rather he felt honoured by her action and put a better construction on the act than what it appeared to be to the male disciples.. To our mind, this is the peak of her achievement as a womanist character, because initially, she was unknown but, at the end of the day her hard work earned her a golden name, she was able to name herself. Thus, the anointing woman broke with Israelite tradition and assumed the role of the ‘men of Judah’, consecrating Jesus and equipping him for his messianic task. Rather than been condemned, she was praised by Jesus for her act of devotion and love in not sparing even so precious a possession (pure nard). The symbolic value of the act clothed it with extraordinary value and made it worth remembering. Also the conjunction of the woman with the leper--the house of Simon the leper (who was probably healed by Jesus) – is significant as it suggests an end time community in which the two once marginalized figures (women, lepers) will be recognized and appreciated.

B. The Hemorrhaging Woman (Mark 5:25-34)

And there was a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his

garment. For she said, if I touch even his garment I shall be made well. And immediately the haemorrhage ceased; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ... And he looked around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had been done to her, came in fear and trembled and fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease. (RSV)

The three synoptics recorded the encounter of the haemorrhaging woman with Jesus and this give credence to the originality of the story. Otherwise it would have been of no significance for the church to have created this story particularly when it has to do with commendation of a woman who demonstrated great faith in Jesus. In the three accounts, Jesus called the woman “daughter” (*θυγατηρ*) He identified with her and thereby gave the woman a sense of belonging. Rather than seeing herself as an outcast, she was esteemed as a part of God’s family. It is significant to note that while Matthew and Luke recorded that the woman touched the fringe (*του κρασπεδου*) of Jesus’ garment, Mark omitted that detail and just said she touched his garment (*θφατο του ιματιου αυτου*). It is possible for someone to know that somebody has touched his garment if the person touched a part that is closed to the body but hardly will someone notice that someone has touched the fringe of the garment particularly when the garment is very loose. Thus the words *του κρασπεδου* constitute one of the so-called minor agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark and suggest that the formers’ account is the original.

This womanist character too was greatly burdened and no physician could help her and she was desperately committed to her desire to get healed in order to attain selfhood.. By the social norms and conventions, she was unclean and unfit to mix freely with others in the society so that she would not defile others with her uncleanness. “Whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening” (Leviticus 15:27 LXX). But this unnamed woman swam against the patriarchal tide and forced her way through the crowd following Jesus to the house of Jairus and dared to touch Jesus’ garment, she was breaking every social conventions (Saunders, 1996, p.39)

This passage and its parallels in the gospel have been subjected to great scrutiny in regard to its historical worth but a reasonable case can be made that Mark is drawing on Peter's stories thus, there is solid core of historical materials in this narrative (Witherington 1990, p.81). It should be noted that the woman in this narrative took the initiative of following after Jesus (*πισθεῖν*), to get her healing realising that both gender need each other to make progress. Sabin observed that she also consciously reflects "If I touch even his garment. I shall be made well," This reflection was then expressed in her womanist reaction and response to Jesus call, "the woman came in fear and trembling, and fell down before him and told him the whole truth" (Mark 5:33) This reaction is an expression of awe followed by a gesture of faith (Sabin, 2002, p.5). The hemorrhaging woman took the initiative of following after Jesus, she trusted him and in faith she reached out for the healing power in Jesus for her healing. She is a model of faith not only for women but also for male disciples. Jesus, said to her "Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace". Jesus did not see her as unclean or a source of uncleanness, rather he treated her as a very important personality having a special relationship with God, "a daughter" in need of help. The woman's faith, commitment and intelligence seem to have triumphed. She was not condemned for daring to touch Jesus. She was not rejected for breaking social conventions and beliefs, doing what ordinarily a woman (more so a ceremonially unclean woman) should not do. This is a clarion call to women (in the church) who are struggling to come out of the crowd, reaching out to touch Jesus for power and serving the Christian community as models of faith, they are not to be condemned but to be commended and appreciated for the entrenchment of intra and inter gender bonding.

This story offers a model of transforming power which calls for the active involvement of the powerless and the powerful, the women and the men, in the hierarchy of leadership in the church. The terrified woman knew that in touching Jesus' clothing she had ceremonially defiled him and that contact with her had probably defiled every other member of the crowd as well. Menstruation made women ceremonially unclean and cut them off from any fellowship with God's people for a part of every month. This woman's sickness had meant that in her case the exclusion had been for twelve long years. Amoah (1986, p.4) argues that in relation to the regulations of Leviticus 15, her flow of blood meant she ought not even to mingle

with people, much less intentionally reach out and touch someone, for fear of making them unclean.

She knew what had happened to her, and she felt awe that always comes over human being when they realise they are in the presence of the divine - *ή δε γυνη φοβηθεϊσα και τρεμουσα*. Jesus is described as possessing a remarkable and awesome healing power that operates automatically upon contact with him. Accordingly the following verse, “...your faith has made you well...” shows the importance or the role of the faith of recipients of miracle or the sick in the healing process. This scene too reveals that the intertwine destiny of men and women is directly related to the notion of the dependency upon the male in the participation of the womanist’s struggle.

At Jesus’ call, the woman came forward, fell at his feet, and told him the truth (v.33). She not only showed faith in touching Jesus’ garment but also in her thoughtfulness, boldness, and willingness to initiate and take risks (Moltmann-Wendel, 1982,p.98). The story of the haemorrhaging woman and her encounter with Jesus revealed that going against what is believed in the society to be the truth, going against widely held long tradition and being innovative may not mean going against the will of God. The haemorrhaging woman, contrary to the truth of her religion (Judaism), the reality of the laws of purity and defilement, uncleanness and contamination, according to the tradition, took some initiatives which brought about some innovations - healing, commendation and self-empowerment. She was not condemned for going against the tradition of the community or the ‘truth’ of religion, rather Jesus supported her action and appreciated her initiative and faith. Women need personal confirmation that their encounter with God produces a valid call to service. And they need sacred texts to show that a theology of women’s mission and leadership can become acceptable in the church.(Adeney, 2005).

IV. Synopses of Novels Under Scrutiny

A. Henri Lopes’ *La Nouvelle Romance*

Wali the heroine, as she is maturing into adulthood has lofty ideas about marriage. She then meets a man of her dream Kwala and real romance begins between both of them. An obstacle anticipated by the lovers soon raises its ugly head: both parents oppose the marriage because Wali happens to be a Southerner while Kwala is from the

North of the country. According to the older people, there could be no marriage between the two groups. She is pregnant for Kwala but nobody takes that into account. Kwala gets a scholarship and leaves for France. He soon gives up on Wali and marries a French woman. The relationship is aborted like an unwanted child. That is the commencement of Wali's sorrows.

Frustrated and waiting for the next man to show interest in her, Wali falls into the hands of a monster of a husband, Bienvenu N'Kama, alias Delarumba. Wali by dint of hardwork and great determination manages to stay alive in her difficult marriage. Every Tuesday, Wali, Awa and Elise meet with other women at local political meetings which enable them to put their domestic problems behind them for a while. Twice a week, Wali takes older mothers and women of her age in adult education classes to give them consciousness of their importance as human beings. They map out strategies for their solution. Free at last in the white man's land, Wali intimates her friend, Elise, in Africa about her future plans such as sensitizing women on the need for women solidarity and formal education in order to transform her patriarchal society.

B. Analysis of Womanist tendencies in selected narratives

Henri Lopes in *La nouvelle romance*, presents a womanist per excellence in his depiction of his protagonist called Awa. He highlights commitment to survival and wholeness of entire people, (male and female), gender complementarily amongst racial, gender, class divides and cultural consciousness and articulation on self, community and societal development among others.

In his *La nouvelle romance*, when Wali complains about Bienvenu's, (her husband) economic violence through negligence of family responsibilities to her friend, Jeanne Impanis, the latter advises her to get herself registered in a school so that she can acquire true self-esteem and self worth which in turns shall enable her among other things to have complete and positive relationship with all people :Thus, she (persuaded her to register and follow a course of study in the Popular University)

On realizing the power and relevance of educational empowerments for self-actualization and for more effective fulfillment of her role as a positive and responsible co-partner in the overall development of the societal struggle, Wali herself remarks :

I have gained so much knowledge from what I read. I am of the opinion that within a short time possible, I have changed a lot. I wished to see you in order to let you know about the book I have read and to be able to let you know the impression I have gained from them...I have the impression that all that I see and learn here, I must tell other women who are still in the country. If they aspired to acquire more knowledge, they would transform the world around them and they, themselves, Lopes (1976, p. 141)

Wali's education foregrounds her ability to forge ahead despite the marital limitations suffered in the hands of her husband. She rises above all the impediments placed on her by patriarchy in the novel. It is the weapon of formal education she eventually employs to fight for her freedom and that of other women back in Africa.

We women, have a particular role to play in this enterprise; for the real slaves who have interest in the great washing of Africa are the women, Lopes (1976,p.139)

Formal education makes Wali a self-definer thereby turning away from the ignorant darkness to which her culture is consigned. We observe here, Henri Lopes' womanist ideological inclination and alignment. We also see how his orientations make a positive impact on his female fictional characters in combating patriarchy.

C. Adelaïde Bignon Fassinou's *Modukpè ou le rêve brisé*

This novel is the first novel of the author. Modukpè the protagonist belongs to the group of women who can be termed dreamers. For instance, like an average African woman, Modukpè's dream or aspiration is to have a fulfilled, or successful happy married life after completing her university education. She is the pride of her father and the one on whom a lot of hope is placed by the family as a whole. The extent of Modukpè and her father's disappointment when her career and marriage fail can therefore be easily imagined. At the end, Modukpè's educational empowerment eases her burden and that of her abandoned child.

Fassinou highlights a tradition of psychological as well as physical strength of self - struggle and the commitment to the art of mothering of one's own children. In *Modukpè*, when Modukpè's

mother leaves her queer husband, she starts selling cooked rice in order to sustain herself and her children. She is successful in the business such that her daughter Modukpè testifies :

It is an interesting scene everyday to see men and women exhausted by the day's work going back home and stop over at the rice seller's. They liked to gather around her like houseflies on crumbs of bread. They almost blind mama's eyes with plate asking for rice at the top of their voice. I want 100F worth of rice! 50 F worth of rice. (Fassinou, 2000, p. 31)

Modukpè too, is depicted as a nurturer and a consistent doer of what must be done for the survival of herself, her son and of the family. She is able to take care of herself due to her economic and educational achievement. She makes this known to her mother when the latter thinks that a woman may not be able to sustain herself alone:

I did not agree with mama's theory. At all! But how do I make this old woman realize that if I have been a wagon tied to a train which was pushing it, today, I am the train or rather the wagon in the main front which is steering my own life. I am the one steering the course of my life. How do I make her realize that way, we, women do not longer want to be wagons pushed here and there, nor do we want to be livestock in bondage? (Fassinou, 2000, p. 104)

Fassinou depicts women who are ready to work in order to ease their burden and that of their children in the time of patriarchal distress. The author portrays a woman who believes in herself and forges ahead with the task of self-fulfilling of emotional and social needs. This author too, demonstrates her commitment to the liberation and progress of women through her womanist orientations.

V. Conclusion

The four female characters under scrutiny all experienced different forms of marginalisation and denigration in their male-dominated societies. However, in each case, the women made a revolutionary impact to combat patriarchal strictures erected against them. Despite

all limitations and oddities, they all strive to achieve self-fulfillment, self-actualization and selfhood. The selected authors demonstrate their commitment to the emancipation and progress of women through their womanist ideological postures. Women in mission have done much in the propagation of the gospel; however there are still a number of factors, in most cases cultural limitations or negative religious traditions that tend to limit their activities.

It is necessary that women be given more opportunity to participate in missions and ministries, with particular reference to Nigeria, which will enable them to experience a variety of ways to serve Christ.

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