



20 | REFLECTING ON MARTINA IYABO OGUNTOYINBO-ATERE'S INCLUSIVE APPROACH TO AFRICAN WOMEN STUDIES

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Abstract

Prof. Martina Iyabo Oguntoyinbo-Atere's works have provided reasons for the inclusion of women, mothers, and children in all aspects of life than being relegated to the margins. The majority of the matriarch's works are based on the oppressed woman's rights and her quest for liberation in the world and in Africa as a whole. As an African woman theologian and philosopher, Oguntoyinbo-Atere defies all odds projecting an inclusive approach to feminist theology in a world and culture dominated by patriarchy, with little or no regard for the plight of oppressed women and the poor. This work analyses and reflects on how her unique research contributions over the years, have sharpened feminist theology from her liberation approach. By adopting the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm that emphasizes the study of African issues by Africans, and issues pertaining to women by African women researchers, this better positioned the researcher to understand the plight of an African woman. The study was able to investigate the background that motivated Martina Oguntotinbo-Atere's feminist research works. The Researcher discovered that Oguntoyinbo-Atere's theological ideas are derived from her use of liberation and contextual method of hermeneutics, her uniqueness is in her inclusive theology, which emphasizes the need to include women in all facets of life. The general purpose of her research is to encourage women to reject oppression, a move that will affect the world and workplace positively, now and in the future. Oguntoyinbo-Atere's inclusive theology addresses and critiques patriarchy, and wrong interpretations of African philosophy while creating a platform for future research on women and culture.

Keywords: Martina I. Oguntoyinbo-Atere, Inclusive Theology, Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm, Feminism

Introduction

Women are treated most of the time as having no voice in a world ruled by patriarchy. They are frequently denied the right they seek, effectively treating them as second-class citizens with no worth, despite their significant contribution to humanity through childbearing. It should be noted that the symbolic African woman and child is a heroic symbol that reveals her resilience and strength, not weakness. In the same vein, "African women have gone through a lot of adversities, but despite their sad history, they have become the epitome of resilience," (Lapinig & Banguiller, 2020:1041–1055).

In some secular and religious settings, they are treated as sex objects, rape victims, or off-screen managers. The pain of also facing abuse, not only from men, but from fellow women and sometimes their children, who have come to understand that their mothers are second, cannot be explained in words. The work at hand is a reflective study of Oguntoyinbo-Atere's research contribution to encouraging women against all odds to reject oppression of any form. As an African, the Nigerian setting and her prior exposure to feminist bodies provided the foundation for her works.

According to Longman and Peter (2008:152), feminist researchers work to see how women can be liberated from the patriarchal, cultural and religious control over them, given that women have historically been marginalized and denied access to positions of authority and influence. Furthermore, feminist academics frequently feel compelled to depart from the text and raise issues with both what the Bible says about women and its underlying assumptions regarding gender (Longman & Peter, 2008:153). The method employed by the researcher is the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm which gives room for African women to research on issues concerning women by deliberately combining Afrocentrism and Womanism (Amenyedzi, 2021:171).

Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm

The development of the Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm could be attributed to the efforts of the Rev. Dr. Seyram B. Amenyedzi (2022). The

methodology "places a strong emphasis on the study of African issues by Africans and issues related to African women by African female researchers." (Amenyedzi, 2022). The inclusive approach to feminism which Martina Oguntoyinbo-Atere uses is the subject of this work's reflective research. By Inclusive approach the researcher meant a platform where women who were formally excluded from norms could participate.

The necessity of this methodology lies in the fact that "if African stories are told by Africans through their cultural lenses, they will be more relevant as they are better conceptualized and contextualized" (Amenyedzi, 2022). The Afrocentric research methodology proposes that Afrocentrism and Womanism are two opposing but related conceptual frameworks that can be juxtaposed as a single framework for researching the African woman within the African environment. African research is conducted by Africans inside our pertinent cultural paradigm. While womanism is limited to African women, Afrocentrism covers the breadth of African research inside African civilizations via the eyes of actual African people. Amenyedzi proposes that womanism which is also known as black feminism engage African women as having their unique experiences which cannot be fully understood in the large context of feminism (2021:171). Although womanism, share similar cause with feminism in the aspect of liberation and recognition of woman, womanist unique features is its determination to look at peculiar African woman issues "aside the general discrimination faced by women, they must also deal with the numerous obstructions, particularly those associated with racism sexism and classism" (Amenyedzi, 2021:171). The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm offers a framework where the researcher can deliberately investigate distinct facets of an African culture in relation to the condition of women in various circumstances within the same culture. The issues reflected on by Martina Oguntoyinbo-Atere make this paradigm relevant to this study. Afrocentric Womanist Paradigm has six systematic guide lines of researching the African woman and they are:

1. What is the African context?
2. What are the essential components of the culture?
3. What is the religious view of the woman in this context?
4. How are women appreciated in this context?

5. How does the situation in question affect the African woman?
6. What are the redemptive elements of culture, and how will that influence the appreciation of African women? (The focus is on both indigenous knowledge system-IKS and or reformed/ reformulated praxis). (Amenyedzi, 2021:172)

Biodata of

Professor (Mrs) Martina Iyabo Oguntoyinbo – Atere

On September 31, 1965, Martina Iyabo Oguntoyinbo-Atere was born in the home of Pa Matthew Babakayode and Mama Lydia Adunn Oguntoyinbo. She was a student at Yekim's St. Mary's Primary School (1970-1980). She received second place in the Atakumasa Local Government's Children's Day Essay Competition (1979). For her A' Levels, she attended the now-defunct Oyo State College of Arts and Science (OSCAS) from 1981 to 1983. She was admitted to the University of Ilorin in 1987 and the subsequent 1986/1987 semesters.

She earned a B.A. (Hons) in Christian Studies in 1987. During the 1987-1988 Academic year, Oguntoyinbo-Atere was offered a scholarship by the world council of churches, Geneva in 1999 for a Doctor of Ministry Programme at the San Francisco Theological Seminary with an International feminist emphasis. In 2000, she was invited for an exchange visit in Cuba. She was a colloquium member of the 2001 Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, which was funded by the World Council of Churches. She is a member of Global Woman Doing Theology, Concerned African Women Theologians, the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), and the Society of Biblical Literature. She has taken a leading role in both women's and biblical concerns. She has participated in a number of regional and international conferences that have taken place in more than thirteen (13) different nations across four continents. She relocated to Lagos State University in 2006, and in 2008 she was made a senior lecturer. She was hired as a professor at Adeleke University in Ede in October 2012. Numerous undergraduate and graduate students have been overseen by Oguntoyinbo-Atere. She served as the University of Ibadan's Assistant Hall Warden from 1997 to 2001, the University of Ibadan's Staff Advisor for Religious Studies students from 1997 to 1998, and the Lagos

State University's Head of Christian Studies Unit from 2006 to 2010. From January 2013 until May 2014, she served as the Dean of Student Care Services at Adeleke University. In June 2014, she also served as the Dean of the Adeleke University Faculty of Arts.

She served as the Chairperson of the Faculty of Arts Welfare Committee at Lagos State University. She is currently the Dean of Student Care Service at Adeleke University. Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State; Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho, Nigeria and others, have all used Prof. Oguntoyinbo-Atere as external examiner. Oguntoyinbo-Atere is a minister of the word and the Director of the Reformation Centre, where she ministers through audio CDs. She is married to Akinyemi Adewole Atere they are blessed with a wonderful and peaceful child, Akinbolaji Adewole Atere. (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2015)

Factors that Motivated Her Work

This aspect of the work-focus mainly on two fundamental questions which are: **First**, what is the African context? This reflective study of Martina, Oguntoyinbo-Atere is majorly from the African context and taking Nigeria as the case study through the lens of religious, socio-cultural contexts of a typical Nigerian woman.

Second, what are the essential components of the culture? The common belief that women are solely meant to take care of the children's welfare to prevent from being nuisance in society motivated her research into issues connected to women's wellness (Oguntoyinbo, 1981:1). Women's education was traditionally thought to end in the kitchen, which played a significant role in why they did not receive formal training until very recently. Seeing women as property was not unusual in an African culture where women are viewed as things to be acquired as long men have the resources to take care of them. Souza as cited by Lapinig & Banquiller describes what an African woman has to go through, "To know oneself as a black woman is to live through experience of having been massacred in your identity, confused in your views, submitted to demands and forced to adopt alien expectations" (2020:1042). Patriarchy in virtually every facet of African life is a norm and as rightly stated by Ame-

nyedzi, “anything contrary is either applauded with some “Wow” or detested with utmost fierceness” (2021:173) in the same vein, Ozyegin as cited by Amenyedizi asserts that “Patriarchy is the parallel of ideologies structures and organizational principles that reinforce subordination and oppression of women in socio-cultural institutions as men exerts power over them as a right” (2021:173). They feel that women are fragile and should not be saddled with the responsibilities of leadership.

Afolabi & Olasupo (2008) assert that only with little exemption will you find women with extra-ordinary positions in the society like the official queen mother (Iya-Oba), serving as dual kings, the queen, Iyaoja. They explain that there are some societies in Nigeria where men’s leadership is abhorred and only women are allowed to hold leadership position over not only women, but men as well (Lobun of Ondo). But it should be noted that although women occupy certain important roles in Nigeria societies, patriarchy has laid side by side these prominent women with a rigid arrogance of a deliberate refusal to acknowledge the prowess of women.

The suffering of an African child is best described in Martina Oguntoyinbo-Atere's book "Victoria Top." It tells the tale of a bright young woman named Victoria, also known as Vee, who bravely overcame challenges at pivotal points in her life. From the early years of her studies until even the advanced stages, she experienced unheard-of extraordinary achievement. Her family, men, and other females who had made a decision to hate her without cause were the oppressors she had to deal with. This might be viewed as the societal context that drove her creative endeavors (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2005).

The Afrocentric Womanist paradigm further poses the question, what is the religious view of the women in this context? Once more, theologically speaking, the church that was supposed to serve as a haven and a comfort for women turned into a place where women were to be silenced and treated as inferior. Women occasionally view the Bible as a double-edged blade that can both be used to defend men's authority and free women. The formal explains that men are the dominance of Jewish culture with few prominent women. The latter is evident from how women are portrayed by St. Luke as being involved in Jesus' mission and filling significant and esteemed responsibilities (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 1987)

According to Oguntoyinbo-Atere, certain church leaders have fostered this mindset in the church by holding that women have no business leading or serving in positions of authority inside the church. Some of the reasons given for these attitudes are, The Old Testament have two words for women in Hebrew. "*Negeba*" means "female," while "*Issa*" means "wife" The *Issa* limits women to being wives, which may be problematic (1987:9). Israelite society perceives women in the household as mothers giving birth to children, preferably males, just like in African society. The birth of the boy was a gift from God. The people mocked the childless woman. However, some extraordinary men, like Abraham, Jacob, and Elkanah, loved their childless wives. "A helper appropriate for him" is a lady in Genesis chapter 2. This phrase may see women and men treated equally.

Oguntoyinbo-Atere was raised in a largely patrilineal environment in Nigeria, as seen by their preference for male children and their education. When a lady is unable to have a male child, she feels inadequate. Because of this, especially in polygamous families, she is mistreated by her husband, in-laws, and even co-wives. Many women who are trying to have male children end up sacrificing their lives on the altar of childbirth, leaving the female offspring at the mercy of cruel stepmothers or family members. It was believed that women's education ended in the kitchen. The federal government "has given emphasis to women's education only to encourage them," a newspaper said in 1986" (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 1987:9).

In addition, Koforiji Olubi, the managing director of British Electrical West Africa Company (BEWAC) Group Nigeria Ltd. and the chairman of United Bank of Africa, as well as Alele Williams, a world-class mathematician and the country's first female vice chancellor, must have had a significant influence on her writing. Mrs. Constance Agatha Cumming-John, a well-known political and social figure; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, also known as "Mama Wa"; Babatunde Ajasin; Georginia Taiwo; Gloria Omodele; and many other notable women who altered the narratives (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 1987:9).

The Role of Women in Oppressing Women

In her writings, Oguntoyinbo-Atere was able to point out some women's inhumanity to fellow women as they bring down other ladies of potential qualities. It is believed mostly that women are oppressed by men who feel intimidated by their activities simply because they have a name they seek to protect, which might be under threat from exceptional women's activities. But little or no attention is given to the perturbing role of fellow women in this oppression mission. Several of her pieces address fellow women's roles. Examples can be *Women against Women*, where two characters in *Victoria Top* portrayed the role of women oppressing women. They are Vee's younger sister and Iyabo, her friend. Vee's younger sister protested not attending a meeting as long as Vee was attending that meeting, simply because she was ashamed of her looks, which did not show that she was older. Iyabo a friend turned enemy was bent on instigating everybody in the neighborhood against Vee. Although she was age mate with Vee, she claimed to be older.

Most time, low self-esteem makes fellow women to castigate and relegate fellow women to the background. These same reasons are why women vying for political positions do not get the needed support from fellow women simply because they are jealous or have been programmed by the society to question and hate successful women.

Feminization of Poverty

The question asked here is: *How does the situation in question affect the African woman?* Oguntoyinbo-Atere opined with numerous statistics that poverty has a female face (1998:21). Most of these women though plagued with money woes and stressed by too many traditional rituals and inequalities still relied on their own strength and embraced the situation they were in. They had the courage to pursue their decisions, letting go of fear, practicing patience, and using their own adversity to help them become stronger (Lapining & Gemarie, 2020:1041). African women have experienced a great deal of adversity and misery. Women in Africa work two-thirds of the continent's working hours and produce 70% of the continent's food, but they only receive 10% of its income and own less than

1% of its property, according to an online news article titled "From dawn to dusk, the daily battle of Africa's women" (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 1998:21). They put in three more hours of combined professional and household effort every day than the typical British woman does. The sooner women are acknowledged as the balance and "icing on every cake", the better for everyone.

Oguntoyinbo-Atere also discusses how poverty affects men in Africa, where an increasing number of women are in charge of running households, which leads to a decline in respect for men. Malnutrition, a lack of advancement in education, early marriage of the female child, and an endless array of social ills such as war, famine, and social vices have a profound impact on women and their offspring. According to Oguntoyinbo-Atere, the wealthy should take care of the poor and needy members of society, lest the God of seasons decide to elevate the underprivileged like Mary, Hannah and Lazarus and degrade the wealthy like the rich man in Luke's story.

The Purpose of the Matriarch's General Theological Thinking (Inclusivism)

Finally, Oguntoyinbo-Atere's work advocate for a fair Nigeria and African society where women can be seen with great prowess and allowed to partake of all that they desire to do without being reminded that she is a *weaker vessel*. The question here to answer as in the Afrocentric-Womanist paradigm is: *What are the redemptive elements of culture, and how would that influence the appreciation of the African Woman?* The purpose of writing is to alienate oppression of any kind faced not only by women, but children, men, and the poor class in society. Her theology has a tone of justice and liberation. Her liberation theology can be seen from a more objective approach, and her claims are not blind to reasons and reality. She truly cares about the poor and oppressed in this bleak world. Her writing so far has received recognition from reputable bodies, and it will not be out of place to say that this objectively in dealing with women, children, and men generally established her inclusive approach to feminist study. By "inclusive theology," I mean studying with objectivity issues related to women where they have been deprived of their rights.

As earlier stated, there are women of reputable positions in Nigerian societies, like the Lobun of Ondo, Iya-Oba (the kings' official mother), the queens, female revered deities like Osun of Osun state, the iconic Moremi of Ife, and queen Idia of Benin (historical figures who fought as warriors for the emancipation of their people), the women kings, and many other reputable women. If these women are accorded the respect and honor due them because of their enormous contributions to societies, women in general should be accorded respect, which will make them believe in themselves and also add to the historical fit of women in the world. The need for unbiased, deliberate inclusion of women in all aspects of Nigerian society will not only lift the country out of its current problems, but will also usher into a new chapter of development and growth.

Findings that Establish Oguntoyinbo-Atere's Inclusive Approach to Feminist Studies

Oguntoyinbo-Atere is renowned for taking a strong stance against the mistreatment of women. She assertively declared in an interview she gave to the *News Paper-Tribune*, a well-known Nigerian newspaper, that "much of her writings are to urge women to reject injustice." She advocated against oppression not just for women but also for men, children, and even those who are under the control of the upper class, and the clergy. Her earlier exposure to feminist initiatives as part of Global Women Doing Theology and the Circle of Concern African Women Theologians, both of which are covered by Mercy Amba Odudoye, gave her more opportunities to realize her potential. Again, as a young African girl growing up, she was able to speak and reject oppression of any kind and even in religious settings.

Findings from her work attest to the fact that there are various tools and masks of oppression faced by women ranging from oppression from men, fellow women, religious, and political instigated oppression, social oppression and cultural instigated oppression. Her careful and unbiased analysis of these oppressions is what has established her inclusive theology of feminist study. By 'inclusive' it means allowing and accommodat-

ing women that have been marginalized and excluded religiously, culturally, socially and politically in order to maximize their potentials. To reiterate her findings in a more concise way:

1. Women have rights just like men and are answerable to God. They have to take responsibility for their own salvation.
2. A woman, when given the appropriate platform, can become the best.
3. Women are not only oppressed by men, but fellow women, because of their jealousy and inferiority complex, are also potential oppressors of women.
4. Poverty has a feminine face. Through her studies, we are able to establish the fact that every calamity and misfortune has a stronger resultant effect on women than on men.
5. Marriage in biblical metaphor-Hosea and the Ten Virgins depicts only the man and woman, with no third party-strictly monogamous. This metaphor does not apply to a large African man who acquires a woman or wife as property.

Suggested Ways Women can Reject Oppression

There are several suggested ways women can reject oppression which are: **(a)** Quality Education: The education of the girl child is a liberative education not only for herself, but for her family, society, nation, and the world at large. Again, since education gets better with age, older women should be encouraged to enroll in adult classes. **(b)** There is a need for proper orientation that will stop the generational transmission of bad and negative cultural oppression of women by men and older women. This will enhance the self-esteem of women. **(c)** A clarion call for women to be role models for other women rather than complicit in women's oppression. **(d)** Women like Constance and Agatha Cumming-John can be raised in our generation to deliberately go into policies for the purpose of influencing policies that will elevate women. (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 1996). **(e)** Dialogue can be a strong tool for curbing religious problems and can also be employed in solving the issue of women's oppression. There should be reasonable dialogue rather than hate and abuse from men. And

women should brave up and be able to communicate their feelings to men without resorting to silence (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2000).

Professor Atere's Recommendations in Relation to Patriarchy and Wrong Interpretation of African Philosophy

Oguntoyinbo-Atere's in line with Amenyedzi studies bring to the lime-light in African philosophy that culture is not beyond critique and her general recommendation is that those cultural practices that are inimical to women's growth and development should be discarded and those that promote their wellbeing should be encouraged (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2001 & Amenyedzi, 2022) According to Odudoye, as cited by Oguntoyinbo-Atere, cultural and traditional structures, as well as misinterpretation of scriptures, have kept women in subordinate roles in church and society (2013:314). She further asserts that married Christian men abuse women who suffer silently because they are seen as "secondary elements that God has conquered for him," so they are free to beat, verbally and emotionally abuse their wives while quoting scriptures (2013:314).

The role of women in instigating cultural oppression of women has been a major concern for Professor Martina Oguntoyinbo-Atere. The cold war between fellow women, rather than relating as comrades, fighting the same course of advancement of women's status in all its ramifications, is disturbing. Fellow women, who are mostly the custodians of some of the gruesome cultural practices that place fellow women in pain and subordination for life, do this without human sympathy as those who have been made apathetic by culture. These men use these uninformed, jealous, stereotyped, and apathetic women to achieve their aim of subordination and subjugation. Her writing has been able to unmask the philosophy behind these practices, like widows' rights, widows' inheritance, and other gruesome practices against women (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2001:58-71). A Study of Gomer and Hosea reveals a comparison between God and Israel in which the marriage metaphor was used just like a husband and wife. She was able to explain that the comparison made by Hosea could not be true in its entirety. Provision comes from God to man,

but not all husbands provide for their spouses. The reality, most especially in Nigeria, is that so many women are the bread winners (Oguntoyinbo-Atere, 2006:97-111).

Extramarital activity, which would have been inexcusable for the wife, is tolerated for the husband. Double standards highlighted the ancient Israelite woman's issues of honor at paternity in many cases. The primary offense is adulterous acts. A woman's extramarital affair is also a first-class offense in Edo State, as it is believed that the woman will bring unpardonable curse to her husband and children, possibly resulting in death. But ironically, these same men can go as far as having extramarital affairs with ladies and marrying them without the society questioning them.

Hosea can be seen as indeed a patient and loving man to have endured and had no record of marrying another woman. If only contemporary men could exercise the patience and love of Hosea, many marriages today would not end in trash, leaving the opposite spouse shattered.

It is revealed that African philosophy has in its custody some teachings that elevate the role of women in the society. A good example is from the Ifa Corpus of the Yoruba Traditional Religion in Nigeria. The corpus has it that a woman made the seventeen gods set by Olodumara, the Supreme God, to establish the order of the earth. Things didn't get strange until she was appeased by the 16th god, as instructed by Oludumare. This story does not portray women as weak entities, but ones full of ideas and potential. If Africans and the world at large can wake up to the unharnessed potential in most women, the world is certainly going to be a better place.

CONCLUSION

Finally, this reflective study on Professor Oguntoyinbo-Atere's inclusive approach to feminist studies reveals her deep concern for women, the challenges they face, and the Nigerian nation as a whole. If her recommendations are implemented in our society, it will be a better and more inclusive world for women. The Afrocentric-Womanist Paradigm thus employed best fit the study by providing crucial answers to the components and role of culture in the plight of women in Nigeria, the role of

religion in women oppression, how these situations have not brought out the best in women but rather poverty, underdevelopment and low self-esteem, and finally given a redemptive aspect of culture in curbing this perturbing situation of a Nigerian women.

It is my recommendation that more research should be done on the role of women in oppressing fellow women and possible panaceas for curbing such in our society in order to achieve a united force among women in fighting oppression.

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