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Abstract

One of the matriarchs of feminist literature is Oyeronke Olademo, a Professor of Comparative Religious Studies. The methods and theories of liberation she has projected over the decades are worthy of study. This paper will examine among other factors, the contexts that informed her work and the sources she used to elaborate her theories of liberation. It will examine the feminist thrust of Oyeronke Olademo as a voice that has advocated women's contributions and advances in the area of religion. The approach used in this work is feminist liberation theology, while the methods are historical, descriptive, and qualitative. A cursory observation of her major works indicates that her focus is in the area of women's leadership roles in a male-dominated environment, both in Nigeria and in the diaspora. Her perception of the leadership role of women across the various strata of human existence is therefore worthy of mention. This work concludes by identifying Oyeronke's efforts at advancing the role of women both in Africa and beyond. The work recommends that more work is needed from other scholars to continue in her steps at making the voice of the matriarchs heard in high places.

Keywords: Oyeronke Olademo, Feminism, African Religion, Christianity, Matriarchs.

Introduction

The contributions of women in every facet of life have become an important subject today. Despite specific challenges that certain cultures have inflicted on them, their voices in politics, religion, education, and other spheres of life can be distinctly and positively felt. Women theologians and scholars have also added their voices in showcasing the values of African women and correcting wrong biblical interpretations. Notable among these African women theologians whose contributions to uplifting the status of African women, especially in academics and religious circles are: Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Ghanaian theologian who has made

significant contributions to African women's theology. She is the founder of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, which was established in 1989 and aims to promote the study and research of African women's theology. Martina Oguntoyinbo-Atere is a Nigerian theologian who has also contributed significantly to African women's theology. Her work focuses on gender issues and biblical interpretation, and has published several articles and books on these topics. Oyeronke Olademo is a Nigerian theologian whose publications extensively centre on African women's theology, including works on the role of women in the African church and the intersection of gender and religion in Africa. Seyram Amenyedzi is a Ghanaian theologian who has written on the topic of women's leadership in the African church and the role of African women in theology. Lydia Akande is a Nigerian theologian who has published on issues related to gender and religion in Africa, *Nigerian Women and National Development*, including the intersection of Christianity and traditional African religions.

As for additional notable names in African women's theology, there are indeed many other prominent figures in the field. Some of these include: Musimbi Kanyoro, a Kenyan theologian and activist who has written on issues related to gender and religion in Africa, and had served as the General Secretary of the World YWCA from 2007 to 2016. Isabel Apawo Phiri, a Malawian theologian has also written extensively on issues related to gender and religion in Africa, and currently the Deputy General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. Funmi Para-Mallam, a Nigerian theologian, has similarly written on the topic of women's leadership in the African church, and presently serves as the Regional Secretary for West Africa for the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in West Africa.

Mercy A. Oduyoye, as mentioned above, also deserves to be included in this list as she is one of the women, having realized the oppression meted on women in religious and academic circles, gathered some African women to correct the wrong notion in 1989. It was reported in *Sankofa 2024 Call for Papers*, that, the gathering was launched “with a clear agenda for women to research, read, interpret, write, and publish in the area of cultural/religious texts for the liberation and empowerment

of women in particular and the whole earth community". Her contributions therefore in the history of African Women Liberation Theology cannot be forgotten. Her efforts to a large extent have impacted positively women in religion and academia, and today some women have occupied and are still occupying leadership positions in faith circles. Some of them are heads of academic Departments of Religious Studies. For instance, Professor Oyeronke Olademo was a former Head of the Department of Religions at, the University of Ilorin, and the first female Dean of the Faculty of Arts, at the same University. Dr. Lydia Akande, was the Head of the Department of Christian Religious Studies, at Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin, from 2005 to 2006, Professor Peju Bashua served as the Head of the Department of Religions and Peace Studies, at Lagos State University, from 2020 to 2022. Church founders are usually the prerogatives of the male; contemporary women have also excelled. For instance, in the words of Akande (2004:85):

Today, we have some women in history who through the help of the Holy Spirit founded Churches. For example, the genesis of the Christ Apostolic Church (worldwide), CAC, could be traced to a woman called Miss Sophia Odulami. Other examples are Mrs. Aimila, who founded Christ the Messiah Church, and Mrs. Bola Odeleke founded Agbala Olorun kiibati ministry, a Christ Apostolic Church with Branches in Lagos and Ibadan (Akande, 2004:85).

Similarly, in gospel song ministrations, women are not left; gospel musicians include, Tope Alabi, Esther Igbekele, Bisi Alawiye Aluko, Adeyinka Alaseyori, and others. However, this chapter focuses on and examines the works of Oyeronke Olademo, an accomplished female scholar and theologian. She is one whose works, and motherly advice have greatly impacted positively on other women folks. Some of her academic and theological thrusts which aimed at advancing the leadership role of women in male-dominated environments both in Nigeria and the diaspora formed the basis of this chapter. Her reasons for this among others as stated in one of her works is that "Gender equality is a progress for all, and the key to sustainable development" (Olademo, 2017:175).

Short Biography of Professor Oyeronke Olademo

Writing the biography of Professor Oyeronke Olademo, a renowned, accomplished scholar and female theologian is a great honour and privilege. A former head, of the Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, the first female Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and presently, the Director, of Center for Peace, University of Ilorin, is the firstborn of the royal family of Oyedeji, Ilé-Aniyùn compound in Ikire, the headquarters of Irewole Local Government Area of Osun State. She was born about 60 years ago. Her academic pursuit spanned through Primary, Secondary, Higher School, and University between 1969 and 1997 respectively. She attended Ijeru Baptist Day School, Ogbomoso (1969-1974); Baptist Girls' High School, Osogbo (1975-1980); Olivet Heights, Oyo (1980-1982); and the University of Ilorin (1982-1985, 1990-1991, 1992-1997).

Professor Oyeronke Olademo did her mandatory one-year National Youth Service Corps at the Institute of Ecumenical Education, Enugu, from 1985 to 1986. She became an academic staff of the Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, in 1991 as an Assistant lecturer. From there, through hard work and dedication rose through the ranks to become a Professor of Comparative Religious Studies in 2011, being the first female Professor in that specialization in Nigeria. She has enjoyed international fellowships and attended several academic conferences locally, nationally, and internationally. Additionally, Professor Olademo is an astute academic, an external examiner to a good number of universities at undergraduate and postgraduate positions, and as well assessed several professorial candidates.

To date as a Professor in the Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, and the Director of, the Centre for Peace and Strategic Studies of the University, she is a committed lecturer, researcher, and administrator per excellence, whose vision and mission for the total wellbeing of women generally in all spheres of life cannot be overemphasized. As a committed and contemporary researcher, she has to her credit over seventy publications as books, articles in journals of repute, and considerable chapters in Books. Some of her works include *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (Olajubu, 2003), *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions*

(Olademo, 2009), *Women and New and Africana Religions* (Ashcraft-Eason, Martin and Olademo, 2010), *The Church, Society and Nation Building* (Falako, Olademo and Oladunjoye, 2015), *Religion, Environment and Sustainable Development in Africa* (Ogungbile and Olademo, 2020), and *Women in Yoruba Religions* (Oládémọ, 2022)

Theoretical Framework

For this work, the main theory adopted is feminism which forms the major frame upon which a very large percentage of Oyeronke Olademo's works are built as would be examined in this study. It thus becomes very germane to discuss what feminism is and its types. The term means different things to different people. But for this work, feminism is a philosophy that advocates equal rights for women and men socially, politically, economically, and religiously. Feminism is not about being proud or arrogant, it is a call for women today to rise and fight for their God-ordained rights as given to mankind. In the words of Mendus; "Feminism was originally a positive movement, focused on giving women the basic rights God intends for every human being to have" (Mendus, 2005). Therefore from the religious perspective, the role of feminist theology among others includes increasing the role of women among the clergy and religious authorities, reinterpreting male-dominated imagery and language about God, determining women's place in career and motherhood, and studying images of women in the religion's sacred texts (Ariffin, 1997). In light of this, and from the perspective of Christian feminism, the woman is expected to obey God, walking in peace and grace, and as well remember that she has free access to spiritual blessings in God, as stated in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"

Feminism as a discipline is divided into five main types. They are; Liberal feminism, Radical, Marxist and Socialist, Cultural and Eco Feminism. For this work, liberal feminism shall be looked at and defined because it is from this angle that Oyeronke Olademo's works are based. Hence, Liberal feminism fights for equal rights for men and women through political and legal reform. Similarly, Liberal feminists strongly oppose discrimination of gender, either in the workplace or in the home, and the patriarchal mentality in inherited traditions is part of the reasons

that led to the Liberal Feminists movement. Therefore, it is from this perspective that we shall examine selected academic and theological works of Oyeronke Olademo, where she has demonstrated that “men and women should not be discriminated against based on gender unless there is a sound biological reason for different treatment” (Olademo, 2017:177). Hence, in the words of Malson:

Feminism seeks to expose male privilege which has been taken as normative and universal; to search for alternative wisdom and uncover suppressed history; to challenge prescribed roles and risk new interpretations of what constitutes appropriate roles and life experiences for women and to take deliberate actions to enlighten women about the danger of the feminine mystique which encourages women to be passive (Malson *et al.*, 1989).

From the aforementioned, it could be said that if women are not treated in a demeaning way, the world at large will enjoy the peace and harmony that God has ordained for mankind.

Cultural, Political, and Economic Context in Oyeronke Olademo’s Feminist Theology

Cultural, Political, Religion, and Economic context form significant aspects of the works of Oyeronke Olademo. Culture can be defined as the ideas, customs, and behaviours of a particular set of people or society passed from one generation to another. This includes their ways of life, mode of dressing, language, and religion. In the words of James Spradley, “Culture is the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior” (Spradley and McCurdy, 1984). From these definitions, the following works of Olademo speak volumes about the culture of women in Africa and particularly the Yoruba-speaking race, and African diasporic women.

In this regard, the some works of Oyeronke Olademo shall be examined. In *Women and New and Africana Religions*; Oyeronke Olademo is one of the Editors. It has 5 editions published between 2009 and 2010. It is a series of thought-provoking write-ups that discussed the day-to-day diverse experiences of women from different ethnicities and nationalities through the eye lens of religion. In *Women and New and Africana Religions*:

Readers hear from women from a number of religious/spiritual persuasions around the world, including Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, South America, and North America. These voices form the core of remarkable explorations of family and environment, social and spiritual empowerment, sexuality and power, and ways in which worldview informs roles in religion and society. Each essay includes scene-setting historical and social background information and fascinating insights from renowned scholars sharing their own research and firsthand experiences with their subjects (Ashcraft-Eason, Martin and Olademo, 2010).

Similarly, in another write-up, *Women in Yoruba Religions* published in 2022, Oyeronke, exposed us to the influence of Yoruba cultures on the religious lives of women in Christianity, Islam, and the African Religion in Diaspora such as Santeria and Candomble. Despite the overwhelming challenges that Christianity and Islam posed to gender issues which have welded significant recognition to patriarchal gender roles, the resources available for women in Yoruba culture have enabled them to compete favourably with the new norms that Christianity and Islam came to offer.

Oyeronke Olademo further posits that; “Yoruba women attain and wield agency in family and society through their economic and religious roles, and Yoruba operate within a system of gender balance, so that neither of the sexes can be subsumed in the other” (Oládémọ, 2022).

Similarly, other works of Oyeronke that portray the cultural values of women include *Gender and Development in Africa and Its Diaspora*. Here, Oyeronke discusses the difficult issues that culture, religion, and ethnicity had caused to bear on the right place of gender in the development of African and African Diaspora communities. These issues form the basic mechanisms of the experiences of Africans in the Diaspora, examined and considered by researchers. In this regard, it could be said that the trademark of development in Africa and the Diaspora is the advancement of the people, and to this extent, African women have performed creditably well, as pronounced in the words of Akintan that; “women have played and are still playing prominent roles in the improvement of the society” (Akintan, 2002:13). This position contradicts the claims of Ola-Aluko and Edewor, “In all cultures, women are considered to be inferior to men. African culture, though diverse, is not an exception”(Ola-Aluko

and Edewor, 2002:13). They went further to say that; “Women are wives and mothers. They do the cooking, the mending, the sewing, and the washing. They take care of the men and are subordinate to male authority. They are largely excluded from high-status occupations and positions of power” (Ola-Aluko and Edewor, 2002).

The aforementioned views of Ola-Aluko and Edewor are not true representations of the cultural values of African women today. They have held prominent positions of power, and have performed creditably well in such positions. For example, the like of the matriarch of Oyeronke Olademo was the first female Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, Nigeria, between 2017 and 2019. This view was emphasized in the following words of Akande that:

In the fields of education, social economic, career, and other aspects of Nigerian life, mentions can be made of prominent women who have contributed meaningfully to national life. Among them to mention but few are; the late Prof. Dora Akunyili, one-time Director of NAFDAC, and the founder of Rebranding Nigeria Campaign, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, a former honorable Minister of Finance, Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, a former Presidential Candidate of Action Congress Party and a one-time Honorable Minister of Education, Prof Ijaya, former Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Ilorin, Prof Oyeronke Olademo, a former and first female Dean, Faculty of Arts, University of Ilorin, Prof. Grace Alele Williams, a one-time Vice Chancellor, University of Benin. It was specifically stated of Alele-Williams, a “Mathematician,” that, “she made valuable impacts with combination of courage, ingenuity and strategy that the growing tide of cultism was stemmed in the university. A task which many men had failed, she was able to make notable contributions” (Akande, 2004).

Also, supporting the above view, Ibim, stressed that; “Women surely deserve more. All over the world, they have had to fight to be relevant in every area of human endeavour based on the premise that most of the professions and positions of authority have to do more with talent and intellect than with any special physical attributes” (Ibim, 1999).

In the political and economic settings, the extent of the participation and involvement of women in the political and economic developments

of their environment as portrayed by Oyeronke Olademo in some of her works cannot be over-emphasized. Women in these fields of endeavours like others have proved to be genuine amazons. For instance, in the following works of the matriarch in this study, *Healing and Women Healers in Yoruba Religion and African Christianity*, published in 2012 in the *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, the economic values of women have been significantly stressed and brought to the limelight. They are referred to as healers, even with their male counterparts. They constitute a very important part of the patient's healing process in both Yoruba Religion and African Christianity.

In the words of Oyeronke Olademo; they are “specialists designated as healers/diviners/custodians of tradition in Yoruba religion. In African Christianity, they are known as prophetesses/prophets/deliverance ministers” (Olademo, 2012b). This in my view are means of promoting the economic values or livelihood of their immediate family and the society at large. This is equally in tandem with the opinion of The UN Women's Watch organization which asserts that “rural women play a key role in supporting their households and communities in achieving food and nutritional security, generating income, and improving rural livelihoods and overall wellbeing” (UNWomen.org, 2013).

Oral Literatures and Texts as Sources of Oyeronke Olademo Theology

Oyeronke Olademo is one of the foremost comparative religious scholars in Nigeria. Her most noted contribution is in the area of Yoruba religion and Christianity. In some of her works on Yoruba religion and Christianity, she makes use of oral literatures, orature, or folk literature (Olademo, 2009). This makes her research contribute significantly to the Yoruba cultural gender paradigm (Olademo, 2013). Oyeronke Olademo in her Inaugural Lecture observes that:

Yoruba religion is a living and world religion with adherents and influences all over the world. The religion is based on oral tradition, though some significant documentation has occurred in recent times. Ifa corpus constitutes the major source of instruction and guidance for the religion (Olademo, 2013:8).

One may begin to understand Olademo's attempt to enlighten the people on *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions* from the quote above. Oyeronke Olademo in her pursuit of how Yoruba women have negotiated their place and duties in Christianity using their cultural tradition of gender equality notes the inventiveness of Yoruba women, who have produced alternate power sources. She further observes that practically speaking, women still look for ways to confirm their identities despite the Christian tradition's limitations. This primarily takes place in ceremonial settings when women participate in women's groups and lead prayers, write songs, perform gospel music, hold chieftaincy titles, etc (Olademo, 2009).

According to Olademo, women maintain religions because they are the guardians of numerous oral genres and the archivists of tradition and custom, where ritual instructions are kept. Through songs, dances, recitations, and other performances, women ensure that faiths' daily activities continue (Olajubu, 2004b). However, religion is especially hurtful to women because, as is obvious, they often have dual roles: insiders because they are essential to maintaining the status quo and outsiders. After all, they have little influence on it. Moreover, the Yoruba proverb that goes like this can be used, to sum up, how women and religion interact *omó só sí ní l'enu, ò tún bu iyo sí, isó ò sé gbé mì béèni iyo kò se tu daànù* i.e. a child pollutes the air in your mouth but puts salt in the same mouth, it's a challenge to swallow the bad odour just as it's difficult to spit out the sweet salt (Olademo, 2013).

Furthermore, Olademo notes that although additional oral genres may be mentioned, the Ifa oracular corpus serves as the Yoruba religion's collection of scriptures (Olademo, 2013). She acknowledges that Ifa verse interpretation is a science that is available to people of both sexes, and the verses themselves are products of certain social contexts. The female Ifa priest is referred to as the *Iyanifa*, while the male priest is called *Babalawo*. Looking at Christianity up until recently, only men's and men's perspectives were used to interpret the texts. Over the years, feminist scholars have drawn attention to the serious consequences of Christianity's patriarchal teachings, with the general recommendation being a pursuit of equality between the sexes in positions of leadership. (Olademo, 2013).

Oyeronke Olademo's Perspectives on Religion and Feminism

Oyeronke Olademo is of the view that women's studies and feminism in the social sciences led to the development of the study of women in religion. She said feminism as a notion developed as a result of women's opposition to how their communities treat them. Yet it's crucial to keep in mind that feminism can mean many things to various people and in various contexts. Feminist Christian theology in Africa is a reality in theory and practice, but it is not without difficulties. African women have a long history of female empowerment in traditional faiths, which could be used as a springboard for feminist exploration of the gospel. The group motive, which women successfully used to assert their power in the church, was one cultural impact in this direction (Olademo, 2012a).

Olademo's starting point was the attempt to show that the relationship between women and religions in Africa is a paradoxical bitter-sweet relationship. This is because "Religion more than any other phenomenon perpetuates the feminine mystique" (Olademo, 2013:7). She strongly believes that feminism has a clear mission and a reliable process. It aims to challenge gender roles and risk new interpretations of what constitutes appropriate roles and life experiences for women, as well as to take deliberate actions to educate women about the dangers of the feminine mystique, which encourages women to be passive. It also seeks to expose male privilege, which has been taken as normative and universal (Olajubu, 2004b, 2004a).

Oyeronke Olademo's approach is to emphasise the crucial negotiating position played by African culture in favor of women's empowerment. She notes that although the process of engaging the gospel from a feminist viewpoint in Africa is ongoing, its influences can be seen in certain practices of the churches. In addition, she observes that interpretations of the Bible are essential for problems with power and gender in religion. In her Inaugural lecture, for instance, she states that over the years, feminist scholars have drawn attention to the serious consequences of Christianity's patriarchal teachings, with the general recommendation being a pursuit of equality between the sexes in positions of leadership. In other

words, the Bible in particular is the primary source utilized to explain how women should interact with authority in religion (Olademo, 2013).

According to Oyeronke Olademo, in terms of Yoruba religion, women's leadership was given in precolonial periods and does not produce conflict, as is clear from a review of the religion's scriptures. The Yoruba cultural gender paradigm strongly affects how women see their position and roles across all religions. Due to this impact, Yoruba women have negotiated their place and duties in Christianity using their cultural tradition of gender equality (Olajubu, 2003; Olademo, 2009). In addition, Olademo opines that similar to how white missionaries were troubled by the forceful personalities and leadership positions of women in society, Yoruba women found the roles that were given to them in Christianity to be extremely unusual. That is why she states thus "the engagement of the gospel from the feminist perspectives in Africa is a process that requires the tenacious commitment of Christians, male, and female, to achieve a community of faith marked by mutual love and respect" (Olademo, 2012:41). This is the basis of her position on religion and feminism.

Thematic Appraisal

This is a woman whose academic career has lasted over 32 years. She has been interested in religion since she was in primary school. It has always been amazing how the religious phenomenon can be used to efficiently communicate with the invisible. She has had the luxury of conducting religious research for more than thirty (30) years, with a focus on Christianity and Yoruba religion, among other areas of interest, particularly women, religion, culture, and society. To comprehend gender inequality, the feminist theory focuses on gender politics, power dynamics, and sexuality. It is within this context that the entire vision of Oyeronke Olademo for examining the reasons why women have not been given leadership positions in some religious organizations can be situated.

Indeed, one of the foremost comparative religious scholars in Nigeria, Oyeronke Olademo stands tall among the feminist circle due to her pioneering effort in the field of comparative religious studies, with a focus on women in religion in particular. Oyeronke Olademo's specific talents

enabled her to identify the link in the dynamic nature of women's standing in both Christianity and Yoruba religion, which she summarized as follows: "I have been interested in exploring why women have been excluded from leadership roles in some religious institutions and my findings show that this is primarily due to patriarchy, which was imposed on African societies through Western culture" (Olademo, 2013: 12). The effort to understand the issues led her to establish how the Yoruba cultural gender paradigm strongly affects how women perceive their status and roles in all religions (Olajubu, 2002a, 2002b, 2004b, 2008; Olademo, 2012b).

Of her most notable contributions the following can be distinguished: first and foremost, her criticism of the distinctive influence of cultural paradigms on the dynamic nature of women's status in Nigerian Christianity and Yoruba religion. Against this background, she proposed Christian and Yoruba religious leaders should promote gender equality to help women reach their full potential in both religions' leadership ranks. To achieve this, Olademo opines that to bring women's issues from the margins to the center of discourse in the study of religions in Nigeria, female interpretations and knowledge of scriptures should be respected and appreciated.

This realization led her to establishment of the Women Counseling Initiative (WCI), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) dedicated to developing and implementing solutions to the suffering and poverty of women in Nigeria. As an educationist, Oyeronke Olademo exerts herself to impart knowledge and mentoring to many young people in various professions who are currently active contributors in their fields.

It is also important to state here that more advocacy and increase social awareness, particularly in a nation like Nigeria where illiteracy and poverty are pervasive, is needed to show the predicament of women in society and how religion has consistently mistreated women in the name of God. This is why her research on women, culture, religion, and society can be said to combine formal and informal educational approaches.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that Oyeronke Olademo has made efforts to improve the condition of women in Nigeria. The central theme that interested Olademo is analyzing the processes of women's leadership roles in religious institutions and how patriarchy and its attending social structures became normative. Her research studies on comparative religion focused primarily on women, religion, culture, and society. Olademo demonstrates the various experiences of women in faith as they are currently practiced. With her work, religion serves as a lens through which the lives of women from a variety of nations and cultural backgrounds throughout the social spectrum are examined. Women from various religious and spiritual backgrounds from all over the world, especially in Africa, are featured in her works. Her works set the scene historically and socially in investigating family and environment, social and spiritual empowerment, power and sexuality, and how these influence roles in religion and society.

Oyeronke Olademo's contributions to practices and leadership can be further seen in *Yoruba Religions and Women's gender relations*. Yoruba women get and exercise agency in the family and society through their economic and religious responsibilities. Yoruba people also maintain a system of gender equality that prevents one of the sexes from being absorbed into the other. Olademo demonstrates how religion is at the heart of Yoruba lived experiences and is inextricably linked to all facets of daily life in Yorubaland.

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