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OF WHAT SEX IS THE TEXT? A NEW READING OF GENDER CHARACTERIZATION AS A TROPE OF HARMONY, COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE AND JOINT HEROISM IN GABRIEL OKARA'S *THE VOICE*

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ABSTRACT This paper is a new reconstruction of gender meanings on Gabriel Okara's post-colonial African fiction, *The Voice*. While it is common to ascribe masculine interpretations to most early post colonial writings, this author argues that Okara's agenda in this novel is to propagate a bisexual, co-sexual and joint gender heroism thesis as the best and most harmonious approach to a true post-colonial African nationalism. The search for "it" (the neuter pronoun as metaphor for the essence of truth, justice, gender equality and fairness) by the male messiah-hero is invigorated by the physical, logistic and spiritual support of the misunderstood female mother figure. In the tale of a strong bond between the two main characters to search "it," and "the thing between us," Okara uses a genderless pronoun and a generic noun, respectively. This desexation in language, style and themes in *The Voice* can be understood and appropriated for the contemporary search for an African epistemology.

Key Words: Gabriel Okara; Post-colonial; Bisexual; Mother-figure; Genderless pronouns; Desexation in language; African epistemology.

Perhaps in contrast to the centrality and popularity of some African writers including Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ, and Flora Nwapa, Gabriel Imomotime Okara seems to have been consigned to a restricted critical visibility. Okara's main work of fiction, *The Voice* (1964), a systematic reconstruction of novel gender ideology that has received little critical attention of Africanist scholars and researchers, is the focus of this paper. While most African writers with a sympathetic disposition to pro-feminist ideology often career their works along the lines of partisan privileging of matriarchy against patriarchy, Okara's *The Voice* posits a radically balanced gender ideology anchored on co-sexual liberation. This liberal gender ideology is related to his limited educational qualifications unlike those of his contemporaries who are high-class academics. Okara was born and grew up in an Ijaw riverine community at Boumandi in present day Bayelsa State of Nigeria. A contemporary of Achebe at the Government College Umuhahia, he studied with government scholarships until he left in 1940 during World War II. During this time, the seed of Okara's writing career began to germinate with the complements of voracious reading and self-education through travel visits to benchmark university libraries such as the one at Oxford University, England. His career as a poet began to yield fruit as his poem, "The Call

of the River Nun,” an autobiographical reconstruction of his early childhood experience in his riverine community, won the Best Literature Award of the Nigerian Festival of Arts in 1955. His poetry collection, *The Fisherman’s Invocation* (1978) won the Commonwealth Prize in 1979. He was a journalist and an information officer in the Biafran Eastern Regional Government during the Nigerian/Biafran Civil War of the late 1960’s. Okara’s whole life, times and literary works straddled the entire contemporary Nigerian history, as an octogenarian born in 1921.

Okara’s expansive life covers a literary epoch, an epoch of experimentation with the domestication of the English language to convey the ideas, thoughts and philosophy of his Ijaw native tongue. Okara’s is an epoch of sensible literary argumentation based on the negative attitude to Achebe’s call for the abrogation of African literatures using European language expression, and espousal of African indigenous language literatures. Okara believes in the universalist–humanist approach to the cultural, racial and gender related problems of post-colonial Africa. No wonder that his novel, *The Voice*, presents a new civilized principle of co-gender humanism in contrast to the mutual uni-gender opposition, in other words, a gender-segregationist approach to solving the problem of patriarchy. For several decades, literary scholarship and indeed the entire Black literature and cultural studies have responded to the urgent need for a redefinition of the female personality. There has been a conscious gender revolution that aims at subverting the hold that male chauvinism and patriarchy has had on every sphere of human endeavor. The consequence has often been a clash of adjacent views informed by Western theoretical models of gender criticism in the African academe. Since the concept of sexuality and gender is irretrievably linked to culture and tradition, it is reductive, perhaps, to attempt undigested application of Western images of sexuality to the African gender relation issue. And while some critical works such as *Women in African Literature Today* (Jones et al., 2003) attempts to provide historical and literary accounts of the emerging trends in African women’s writings, this paper is an attempt to examine the subject and theory of bi-gender meanings in an African male writer’s novel. Therefore, I hope to contribute to the efforts to search for, define, re-define and contextualize the African literary theory of sexuality without recourse to the usual emotions of gender politics, polemics and antagonism.

There are female Africana writers and critics including Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, Mariama Bâ, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Omolara Ogundipe–Leslie, and C. O. Ogunyemi, known as ardent feminists. Male Africana writers, such as Wole Soyinka, are said to have down-played the role of women in some of his plays, while Achebe’s earlier works are also said to put female characters in the misunderstood and misinterpreted states of helplessness and relegation. They are consequently branded as male chauvinists or antifeminists. This broad classification using feminists and antifeminist columns is faulty and has often led to a misinterpretation of African literary texts. For instance, Achebe’s characterization of Unoka in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) contrasts sharply with his depiction of Okonkwo, the latter’s son. Although the

two characters are male, cultural theories and psychoanalysis yield a meaning whereby the physically weak but levelheaded and verbally creative character, Unoka, has a feminine personality. On the other hand, the vigorous, energetic, fierce and rash behavior of Okonkwo is evidence of a masculine personality. Thus, gender differentiation in literary theories does not sheepishly end at biological sex classification. Rather, sexuality is an aggregate of remote and active traits, values, emotions, responses, ideas, dreams, all of which may be used to determine the non-biological sexuality or gender of a human personality, a text or any phenomenon in nature.

The feminist criticism of African literature should therefore attempt to consider the traditionally well known code of identification for gender in a particular text or culture rather than to hastily generalize that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for example, presents female characters as subservient subjects, as housewives and other inconsequential forces, in the dynamics of social order. The wild fire character of Okonkwo is an overt manifestation of a besetting lack and a tormenting fear and hollowness. His attempt to fill the ignoble psychic and economic gulf left by his father propels him to display excessive anger, rashness and energy. He, therefore, becomes a character to be pitied by his wives who are the ironic victims of his morbid disposition. It is not the women in Okonkwo's life that needed feminist sympathy and liberation. Rather, as posited in Fashina (2006), it is the self-destructive character, Okonkwo himself, that needs liberation from the extreme masculine nature that has conspired to consume him.

The feminine ideology that would emerge from the cultural interpretation of African literary texts and cosmos is that femininity becomes an ideal anchor point for co-sexual existence, peace and harmony in society. Thus, femininity is describable as comprising the elementally social, psychological and cultural forces of morality, virtue, peace, patience, faithfulness – any of which can be found in a male or a female character. With feminist consciousness assuming this dimension of meaning, the relevance of gender theories in social or cultural studies would be the injection of the gender-balanced cooperative principle of gender unity for the purpose of societal peace and development. The feminist virtue is not unconditional. A female person does not just automatically possess the feminine virtues only because she is female. Neither is the masculine personality incapable of these virtues because of his gender. Rather, there are ideal behaviors and qualities of African civility and integrity which both male and female can possess to make them qualify to be classed in the paradigm of the "African feminine." This paradigm includes the moral principles that govern a person's behavior, self-discipline and restraint. And the quality is not necessarily resident in older members of the African culture community. The African cultural community is also extensive, stretching beyond the geographical boundaries of Africa to Asian and Western countries. Thus, I suggest that this paper may be universal, serving the interest of global village relevance.

Take for example, the virtue of honesty, humaneness, and of virginity or sexual purity, which I view as the ideal "feminine" virtue. This virtue, the reader

shall see, is possessed by both Tuere and Okolo, the two principle characters in *The Voice*, which I examine against the background of a new gender interpretation. There are also the virtues of bravery, courage, fearlessness, studiousness, and caring disposition, which are ascribable as the ideal, balanced “masculine virtue.” By these ascribed aggregates of gendered virtues, one may possibly propose a theory of gender for African literature, whereby codes of a gender interpretation may hinge on and be derived from the generic Igbo concept of “Nneka (supreme mother)” as presented in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, and the Ijaw concept of “Tuere (the last virgin woman)” semiotically presented in *The Voice*. The same concept is found in much elaborate cultural semiotic magnitude in the Yoruba concept of “obinrin rere,” a close semantic equivalence to “the good woman.”

In Sigmund Freud’s lecture on femininity published in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1975), male and female sexuality are equated with activity and passivity, respectively. I however suggest that Freud’s psychoanalytical model does not ascribe positive and negative qualities to the two divisions of gender traits. Passivity is not necessarily a weaker force than activity in the human social order. Rather, the two are complementary, as they exist in symbiotic and determinate relations to each other. Rosen presented William Gladstone’s statement as leader of the Liberal Party in Britain: “If there be a subject in the whole compass of human life and experience that is sacred, beyond all other subjects, it is the character and position of women” (Rosen, 1974: 10). Gladstone’s fundamental message here is not probably that women were superior to the male subject in society. Rather, Gladstone is reacting, as a political leader, to the political bias of the British society then against the question of women’s suffrage. The “character” of women is, ideally, supposed to be one of balance, honesty and loyalty.

Hibba Abugideiri commented on the “colonial medicine’s construction of Egyptian womanhood,” whereby the “modern Egyptian woman, whether she was an Egyptian midwife or housewife, was subordinated by the reconstituted view of woman’s nature as nurturing, caring and maternal, that had been brought about by medical modernization” (Abugideiri, 2004: 96). The colonial medical modernization of the Egyptian woman impacted positively on the way modern Egyptian women applied their new values and synergies to the question of Egyptian nationalism. These are social values and codes for understanding the ideal feminine behavior. The mission of Tuere, the female social liberator, human rights fighter and mother-figure in *The Voice*, deserves a closer reading and an appropriation to the contemporary quest for gender balancing and equality. Thus, Tuere, although a fictional character, represents an index of her types in history and contemporary African society whose virtues and values are unsung. In the novel, Tuere is a female nationalist with a cooperative trans-gender mission to instill civility and reason to an otherwise patriarchal Ijaw nation in Nigeria.

Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud influenced the radical ideological construction of the 20th century through their theories of ideology and the unconscious

respectively. In my opinion, the ideas of this duo indicate the futility of reliance on the rationality of men in the quest for positive changes in society. Both men and women are to harmonize their gendered qualities and assets to build a peaceful and harmonious world. The concept of “bisexuality” was propounded by Freud and it made him well known as a sexual liberationist. The distinction often made between femininity and masculinity in literary and cultural theory created a problem of sexual alienation. The distinction was often made in early African and African-American literature to consign women to a “devalued gender status and as a result more negative experiences” (Martin et al., 2002: 665). Scholars have argued that separatist policies such as gendered quota concessions in favor of women are not based on merit and “competence,” and this may lead to “stigmatization” which further drives women to develop critical attitude in defense of their sex with far-reaching gender political activism (Holli et al., 2006: 176). This is where the bisexual nature of Okara’s characterization of Okolo and Tuere becomes relevant as a thesis against gender apathy. In this paper, I present a dimension of literary interpretation of *The Voice* as Okara’s co-sexual agenda, a reading that has received little or no significant attention by critics. The co-sexual principle of characterization in *The Voice* makes it an ideal field of study for joint gender heroism in the struggle for human development, societal growth and gender liberation.

I suggest that Okara has a literary agenda of bisexual ideology in writing *The Voice*, an agenda whose obvious signals had escaped the critical lens of erstwhile critics. I therefore suggest that Okara’s novel, *The Voice* has been misread, mistaught and misunderstood by the critics who posit that Amatu society’s negative labeling and perception of Tuere shows Okara’s own disenchantment with the character of her female personality. Professor Claudio Gorlier of the University of Turin, in a paper delivered at Okara’s 70th birthday anniversary at the University of Port Harcourt in 1990, lamented:

The current Western fallacy consists in laying the African book (*The Voice*) on the Procrustean bed of Western conceptualization with a singular dose of sympathetic condescension. Placing a premium on African specificity may lead to an involuntary marginalization, whereas forcing an external methodology amounts to an actual seizure of the African work of art or even a kind of confiscation of its discourse (Gorlier, 1990: 1).

Gorlier’s position here well captures the dilemma of literary interpretations which inevitably bedevil any African or oriental literatures written in Western languages. However, there are universal meanings never restricted to particular continental cultures. I posit that the issue of bisexuality is one such universal construct in that “He that made them from the beginning made them male and female” (Gorlier, 1990: 4). Co-sexuality is therefore recognizable as the God-given nature to man and woman since Eve was made from the rib of Adam. Man and woman aspire to and are attracted to each other through the symbiotic

relation and element of creation that makes them inter-dependent on each other.

Like many feminists, there have been significant male writers who extol the need to bestow on the modern woman an equal human recognition as her male counterpart. Understandably, the rise in the women's rights struggle even in Britain and other parts of the globe has been due to awakened consciousness of female degradation, that the male assumed greater power in all of family life, public life, government and business engagements. Barbara Cane reviewed the feminist history of a particular British family between c.1860-1950 and revealed how Jane Strachey, the matriarch of the Strachey family awakened to the struggle: "She came to see the way in which familial and social expectations thwarted the capacity of individual women to follow their own talents and inclinations" (Cane, 2005: 386). Jane Strachey was said to feel averse to the women's intellectual enslavement and incapacitation that women's freedom of choice to make use of their creative potentials and talents were restricted because of their gender. She and her next two generations of the Stracheys were accounted in the history of women to have struggled for equality of gender (Cane, 2005). While the historical women's struggle has been documented and studied in the Western world, it is not to be understood that Africa has no history of female activism and advocacy for gender liberation and equality. In fact, Kingma and Sweetman in the editorial commentary in their *Gender, Development, and Advocacy* argued that advocacy for female emancipation "has happened across the world in very different cultural contexts – contrary to popular prejudices about the women's movement, which suggest that feminist protest has solely Western origins. Women's protests against unfair, exploitative, or cruel treatment at the hands of husbands, community leaders, monarchs, and other rulers have been documented in countries across the globe" (Kingma & Sweetman, 2005: 2).

No wonder Okara's *The Voice* employs the gender equation hypothesis in subverting the hold that Amatu society's patriarchal elders and rulers have on female freedom and their capacity for equal "talents and inclination" with men. In some early African writings such as those of Achebe, Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Armah and Ngugi, critics superficially identified the characterization of their female characters and hastily concluded with the outcry that female characters were pushed to marginal roles. These misleading critical positions had often been informed by an over-dependence on critical sociological canons anchored in Western epistemology. Cultural practices such as marriage rituals and compulsory payment of "bridewealth" have been explored recently by Ohta (2007) in relation to the culture of the Turkana in northwestern Kenya, with the positive recognition of the honor placed on both prospective groom and bride, but especially on the bride whose female virtue is adored and for which the bridewealth serves as a symbolic token.

The Marxist dogma about social conflict and opposition of thesis and antithesis seems to blind the early post-colonial critic from the reality of the more meaningful scientific theories of textual interpretation such as literary semiology and psychoanalysis. For example, a consciousness on the part of the critic that a literary text is a meaning-producing factory, a semiotic project, will aid his

analysis of the text. The critic would understand that the meanings and the several levels of meanings are to be coaxed out of the text. Every word, according to post-structuralist theorizing, is a symbolic signpost to different directions of meaning. Psychoanalytical models of interpretation would also assist in reading a text to yield its manifest and latent meanings, overt and covert causes of a character's responses, actions or inactions.

Thus, I am wont to suggest that there abound in African literature copious examples of misunderstood and misinterpreted female portraitures. In some texts such as Ngugi's *Weep Not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1977), *Devil on the Cross* (1982), the female personality or the feminist image is built on overt positive depiction of women as spiritual forces, mother-figures, counselors, and powers of reproduction. These works of Ngugi share a kindred ideological cycle of female messianic heroism and joint male-female heroism with *The Voice*, where the female energy is symbolically valorized via the instrument of imagistic language and actions of the character, Tuere. In these works, the fabric of anti-feminist claim of female inferiority and weakness is broken down by the symbolic, dramatic and fictional characterization of the formidable female voice of reason in Okara's *The Voice* and the anonymous female voice in Ngugi's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. The feminist characters in these works assume the symbolic function of mother-figures, always providing the spiritual shield, the moral instruction, and the energy for continued exploration of the male principle characters' revolutionary course and mission.

In *The Voice* as well as in Ngugi's works, a corresponding literary stylistic pattern is noticed in these writers' valorization of the "voice," essentially a female voice, as a complex symbol and an elaborate metaphor that always acts as ever-present guiding spirit (a sort of *deus-ex machina*) that encourages and propels the male protagonists to action. Most critical receptions of *The Voice* have largely over-reacted to the issue of his experimental usage of the English language in a domesticated form to conform to the linguistic and cultural sensibility of his Ijaw native tongue. It is noteworthy, however, that there is a multiplicity of meanings in *The Voice*, which transcends the realm of linguistic nationalism. One such meaning is the ideology of gender politics, the valorization of female energy. Beneath the surface of the thematic fore-ground in the novel is a deep and intense bisexual and co-sexual agenda. It is significant, perhaps, that the "voice" in the fictional landscape of Okara's and Ngugi's works does not suffer a crisis of identity. In spite of the different transformations of meaning that the "voice" assumes in the novel, it is certain, through the reinforcement of fictive metaphors carrying condensed meanings, that *the voice* in Okara's novel is that of Okolo, the saintly male character. Critics who attempted a shallow reading of the novel often lay claim to the fact that Okolo's is the "voice," simply because his name means "*the voice* from the inside of one's belly" in Ijaw language. This interpretation is a betrayal of the complex ironies used by Okara in the novel. A close reading would reveal that the "voice" is that of a female personality. It is Okolo's guidance spirit that propels and encourages him

not to give up his fight against social decadence. The linguistic and metaphoric signifiers in the text reveal that the “voice” is of a disembodied, but active female personality.

As Okolo on the soil of Sologa trying to pierce the thickness of the night with his eyes, a voice close to his ears startled him with a whisper. ‘I have not the big thing between us forgotten. You will of my doings hear concerning it’. Before Okolo recovered from this the shadowy figure of a woman gripping a girl by the hand slid into the night, a black night like the back of a cooking pot. As Okolo gazed at the spot where the woman and the girl had with the night merged like a drop of water into a river, he was again startled by a voice close to him (p. 75).

The passage cited presents word-pictures through the use of symbols, metaphors, figurative and transfigurative language that ignites the reader’s sense of imagination and fiction. The “voice” is associated with a female personality. There is no doubt that the “voice” is that of Tuere, the female protagonist whose ideology of liberation finds compatible essence in Okolo’s struggle. The claim that *the voice* is Tuere’s is justifiable in the sense that “the woman and the girl had with the night merged like a drop of water into a river.” The “voice” emanates from a female figure. There is a fictional imaginative projection of a seemingly magical fusion of the girl and the woman, and vice versa. The character, Okolo, to whom the “voice” is a counselor, instructor, teacher, mother figure and companion is a male personality. Here this novel yields its underlying meaning: an encoded co-sexual agenda whereby there is utilization of the compatible essence, with the neuter pronoun “it,” a grammatical item whose function transcends that of a replacement of a noun in the phoric relation. “You will hear of my deeds concerning it.” In this discourse, “it” is the phenomenon that underscores the compatible essence and the cooperative gender principle between the female and male sexuality. Since neuter is gender neutral, “it” becomes a functional grammatical and symbolic sign that refers to both male and female. “It” (neuter pronoun) cements the gender gap “between” the “voice” and Okolo, the male that the female voice speaks to.

There are three gender classes of a pronoun: masculine, feminine and neuter. All three types are significant in Okara’s discourse. Thus, there is an ideational and ideological proposition that is being cleverly suggested by Okara in this novel: that gender relationship should be a relationship of unity whereby the masculine and feminine are co-sexually bound by a neuter (neutral) gender. “It” can, therefore, be any thing, including erotogenic relations and anthropomorphic relations. This is signified in the unity of purpose between Tuere (the female) and Okolo (the male) to fight oppression, poverty, and other decadent forces of society. One can still extend this reading of “between-ness” to the statement made by *the voice*: “... the big thing between us ...” There is obviously a “big thing” between Okolo and Tuere. And that “big thing” is found in their

joint vision to inscribe truth and sanity on the collective conscience of society, whereby both their male and female energies are annexed and fine-tuned in a co-gendered agenda that is suited for the cure of the sick minds and “insides” of their otherwise patriarchal society. Thus, the novel becomes Okara’s philosophical demystification of patriarchy, and the valorization of gender cooperation and harmony.

The strong bond built upon the gender cooperative principle makes male chauvinism disappear while female ego thins away as “he” (Okolo) and “she” (Tuere) submerge and dissolve the sexual and gendered gulf to reproduce a genderless spirit and power, the “it.” Thus, Okolo and Tuere are, by implication, de-sexed. This principle of de-sexation of nouns and pronouns is an aspect of post-modernist theorizing in gender theories. In 1992, some radical feminist ideologists and academics in America refused to attend seminars unless they are renamed “ovulars” (Fashina, 1997: 94). The argument is premised on the fact that the word “seminar” is derived from “semen” denoting the male reproductive fluid. Thus, for the feminists, “seminar” is a male gender ego term that connotes male dominance of intellectualism. Why should it not be renamed “ovular,” the female reproductive principle? Perhaps, a bisexual resolution of this crisis in gender-lect would come from what I have described as the gender cooperative principle. My suggestion is to rename seminar as semi-vular to reflect the equality of male and female sexuality. This “gender-lect” would therefore absolve the problem of gender conflict through the style of lexical de-sex-ation.

Okara’s variant of de-sex-ation in *The Voice* is one of co-sexuality in which case Okolo and Tuere, as indeces of their gender in Amatu society, are psychologically de-sexed for the purpose of harnessing the complementary aspects of their asymmetric gender to social advantage. Thus, the dividing gender dissolves and crystallizes into a neuter gender “it,” signifying a common identity and in-betweenness, an extrapolation of the essence of being “in-between” instead of being on either extreme sides of gender politics and polarity. The symbolic feminist essence is used by Okara as a strong spiritual force behind Okolo’s mission aimed at purifying the menacing putrefaction of society, a mission to instill an exemplary principle of gender cooperation, submerge the menacing patriarchal system of leadership among the Elders of Amatu, and consequently, sweep out the debris of moral decay and shallow-mindedness of the misguided, patriarchal and superstitious rulers of Amatu society.

The gender cooperative principle and harmony between Okolo and Tuere is also found in the fact that both of them are symbolically made to be *the voice* at different stages of the novel:

“I cannot stop,” Okolo with whisper spoke. I cannot stop this thing. I must find it. It is here. I am *the voice* from the locked up insides, which the elders, not wanting the people to hear, want to stop. Their insides are smelling bad and hard at me, but ... (p. 34).

That is Okolo speaking, and representing himself in the all significant first person pronoun, “I,” which indicates singularity. But, later on, this singularity of vision and mission is transformed to plurality as Okolo finds compatible essence and quality in Tuere as the mother figure. Henceforth the use of subject and object position plural pronouns, “we” and “us,” respectively, becomes a linguistic trope of their unity and harmony of energy in pursuit of their common goal. Although, the above excerpt shows the presentation of Okolo as the male voice, the repressed but often erupting voice of justice and reason, on page 75, the “voice” transforms into a female voice, indicating that it is Tuere’s. Although Okolo is, symbolically, “*the voice* from the locked up insides” of Amatu society, I find it evident that Tuere’s is the “voice” from the exteriorized and alienated “outside” – the mother voice, the female voice that supplies the psychic energy and encouragement to Okolo in moments of disillusionment. Thus, Okara’s literary and linguistic genius is revealed in the compact use of the gender and neuter pronouns as well as prepositions, “inside” and “outside,” to symbolize the essence that completeness and wholeness reside in gender balancing, cooperation and harmony. The light in Okolo’s vision would have been extinguished soon in the novel if not for the timely “voice” of spiritual protection and guidance which echoes from Tuere’s hut:

Okolo ran and as he ran past, a voice held him. “Come in” it said, “Come in quickly.” In Okolo went instinctively and into the gloom, stood panting. Outside the dog barked, the pursuing feet of the world stopped ... (p. 28).

The “voice” that “held” Okolo is Tuere’s. Tuere becomes a moral instructor and teacher, a feminist philosopher, who through action and emblematic words, seeks to lighten the dark alleys of the people’s heart:

“Yes, you say I am a witch, so I am a witch be.” The standing shadow with all his inside spoke and watched their reaction as a school mistress would the reaction of her pupils after delivering a few homilies (pp. 30-31).

The “crowd” that gathered at her threshold to demand release of Okolo for state prosecution and punishment is an index of the society of Amatu as a whole. Okara’s appetite for figural and metaphorical presentation of every detail in the closed circuit of the novel is trenchantly demonstrated in his equation of the “crowd” to “the world”: “hands clawed at him, a thousand hands of the world” (p. 28). This metaphor imposes an extended meaning and significance on the scene, the characters, and the action. The universal essence is probably that the world, a depraved world, is being satirized and derided for the folly in pursuing a guiltless young man to the threshold of a woman outcast who is also misunderstood and superstitiously suspected to be a witch. The male-dominated world would ironically learn its lesson from the tutelage of a woman it has

rejected and condemned as an outcast who is a member of the so much marginalized sex of the society. The reason for my assertion can be inferred from the passage cited above. In the passage, Okara uses simile to equate Tuere to a school mistress delivering her homily to her pupils. The chauvinistic elders of the society are dwarfed through the comparison to a pupil in a teacher-pupil relationship. The female energy is thus positively valorized as a means of reversing the awkward definition of subservience and powerlessness, which the African society had hitherto given the feminine gender.

Humain Ibrahim, in his theoretical review of the close affinity between sexual liberation and the struggle for political freedom in Dambudzo Marechera's novels, wrote that:

It is the revolutionary woman who compels the colonized man to envision revolutionary state by utilizing his "critical consciousness." Thus it is the politically and socially conscious woman who brings him (the man) out of the "gut rot" which enveloped him ... (Ibrahim, 1990: 88).

This statement is just as true of Tuere's influence on Okolo's revolutionary vision in *The Voice*. Tuere's enormous intelligence, vigor and near masculine personality shields Okolo from the claws of death as the people of Amatu pursue him as if he was a madman. Through the grandiloquence of Okara's metaphors and figural descriptions of Tuere and her fictional environment, and the imaginative and filmic depiction of Okolo and his impeccable speech, the reader is able to discern a kindred spirit in Tuere and Okolo. Okara further explores the possibility of fraternizing this compatible essence in Okolo and Tuere, to build a mansion of meanings from the shared vision of the hero and the militant female protagonist. Tuere, the branded witch, becomes, through different metaphorical colorings of her actions, speech and hut, the immovable rock behind Okolo's determined effort to transform the society and wake the rulers from their slumber and delusion. The metaphor of the living flame in Tuere's hut summarizes, as it foreshadows, the totality of experience of Okolo and Tuere in futility in the novel. But, Okara foregrounds the continuity of their joint gender struggle at the end of the novel. Okara's trope of futility is captured in the fictional description of the sudden gust of flame that emerges "momentarily" and dies prematurely:

Okolo heard walking feet. Then he saw the embers glow more and more like a new-appearing sun or a going-down sun. Then he saw splinters of firewood drop on the embers. And then he heard her (Tuere) trying to blow the embers to living flames. She blew, blew, blew and blew, but the embers only glowed not responding like a god more sacrifice demanding. They only glowed showing a face intent in supplication. She continued to blow, her breath coming in soft gusts. Then a token of flame shot up momentarily and died (p. 24).

The flame is Okolo. Thus, Tuere's blowing of embers into a living flame metaphorically depicts her role as the propelling force behind Okolo. Tuere's characterization by Okara is a negation of the weak, almost insignificant role to which women were relegated in some early African writings, especially in the early novels of Achebe where women are presented as domesticated creatures. Okara's *The Voice* as do Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1982), *Altine's Wrath* (1986a), *The Oriki of a Grasshopper* (1986b), Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), and Ezenta Eze's *The Cassava Ghost* (1974), highlights the "suppressed aspects of woman nature while at the same time working towards a non-sexist society that can guarantee female self-actualization" (Ola, 1986: 33).

Okara subverted the patriarchal order deliberately, perhaps, by "assassinating" the male suitors of Tuere, thus making the girl inscribe the integrity of her feminist value and virtue upon the social and political history of her society. This claim of Okara's "assassination" of Tuere's male suitors is notionally inferred from the way and manner the novelist makes all the suitors die one after another in mysterious ways. Okara, the fictional craftsman makes the protagonist reject the love overtures and marriage proposals of all her suitors.

Tuere is a woman of Amazonian personality. In response to Chief Izongo's "gravel"-wielding words of command, the female protagonist displays Herculean strength, boldness and fortitude:

Doesn't shame fall on your head, you man without a chest, for saying you want to burn a woman's house down to the ground? If you a male man be with strong chest, come and take him. She challenged standing straighter than straightness (p. 123).

Amatu society's negative perception of the female is revealed in the character Abadi's statement that "Any person who turns his back on what we all agreed we will do is a woman and not fit to sit among us Elders..." (p. 124). This statement reveals the patriarchal ideology of Amatu society, which Okara is exposing for critical derision. The character's ascription of general fickleness and weakness to female personality is grossly wrong in light of the enigma of sterling masculine qualities, displayed by Tuere in her staunch and unflinching support for Okolo's vision of political transformation and social regeneration of the people's lives. Her feminine virtues, self-reservation, quietness and physical beauty are misconceived as negative. Hence she is ostracized from the society and has to live an isolated life in the forest.

The society's perception of the gender inequality is reflected upon the collective psychology of its citizenry. While Tuere would like to die and reincarnate as a man, another character, Ukule hopes to remain a man, but not a cripple. His intent to retain masculine gender is justified in a society that is crumbling under a threadbare tradition of female subservience and devaluation. Tuere, for example, would probably have performed better as a ruler, or a legislative power, in the council of Elders than as a female social critic whose voice of revolution is bound to "die in a moment" as do the symbolic glowing embers

in her hut. Happily, the reins of government in some African nations of the 21st century are in the hands of notable women. For example, Liberia now has a woman democratic president, while in Nigerian National Legislative Assembly, the House of Representatives, recently had a woman as her Speaker, while some deputy governors of States in Nigeria are female. Professor Dora Akinyunli as National Director of the hitherto ineffective, National Administration for Foods and Drugs (NAFDAC) under the Obasanjo government in 2004 has effectively checkmated and minimized the crime of drug trafficking in Nigeria.

Tuere is conscious of Amatu society's perception of the woman as "temptress" as in the biblical Eve or Delilah. As Ola said in his study of the feminist role in Ayi Kwei Armah's novels, the Amatu society perceives that the woman functions no better than "appealing to the man's natural desire for material wealth in the form of long car and a big house or the romantic effects of a sweet smelling perfume" (Ola, 1986: 33). On the contrary, Tuere's close identity with poor Okolo is with a pure and obviously heroic motive. This could also be linked with the misinterpretation of Okolo's attempt at shielding the "girl-bride," Ebiere, from the cold, rain and storm by offering her his raincoat for a cover. Critics whose minds and thoughts are misguided misinterpret his action as a sign of allurements and an immoral attempt to seduce her into a love relationship. This reading is wrong as it betrays his pure motive of human care and love. In the society of Okara's novel, the female personality is marginalized, enslaved and imprisoned by tribal customs bordering on gender politics. This unfortunate cultural imprisonment of the woman resonates in the patriarchal society's suspicion and condemnation of Okolo's offer of protection to the girl-bride.

Amatu is a society with an established negative disposition towards the female component of its population. Tuere is branded a witch because of her attitudes, which could otherwise be seen as virtuous and desirable:

She had been a girl with unusual habits, keeping to herself and speaking to herself. She did not flirt with boys, though she had a hunger-killing beauty. So it was in the insides of everyone that perhaps she had not the parts of a woman (p. 31).

The society's view of Tuere as a sexually frigid lady is defeated by her apparent fall in love with Okolo, a man in whom she finds compatible essence. Thus, the society's suspicion that "she had not the parts of a woman" is again negated by Okara's metonymic presentation of the phallic symbol in the phrase "the big thing between" Okolo and Tuere, indicative of sex, as well as the erotic impulse and imagery evoked by Tuere's call at Okolo to "come inside." This is a clinical reading and interpretation which earlier readings of this novel lost sight of.

The society of Amatu responds with suspicion, detachment and lack of sympathy for Tuere when she loses her mother and father in a rapid succession of weeks, and when her suitors die one after the other. A sense of sympathy on

the part of the society could have absolved this virtuous lady of the shocking effects of alienation and nostalgia for her lost parents and lovers. Hers is the social and psychological plight of women in many African societies, whereby women are still considered as creatures to be used, suspected and marginalized. In fact, many widows are being oppressed, assaulted and ejected from their husband's houses after the death of their spouse. And any woman who struggles hard to surpass the economic and social limits of their husbands are usually branded as witches by the superstitious community of patriarchal order. The inherent contradiction in such a socially ambiguous society is the way it discounts with brutal clarity any effort by a woman to demonstrate courage and fortitude in matters that transcend the limits of her domestic role. Women are pushed aside from state affairs. Bringing us from initial concealment to disclosure through the psychological exposition of Okolo's stream of consciousness, the omniscient narrator reveals:

He also remembered how in a circle of strong eyes and strong faces she stood being accused of taking witchcraft to kill her father and mother. They then from the town drove her (p. 31).

This is an instance of melodramatic presentation of situational and cultural irony in which vices punish virtue. This scene coupled with a similar scene of Okolo's pursuit by the angry mob, Chief Izongo, and his myopic subjects, in an imagery of the Nigerian Police, reveal the defects in the collective psychological thinking of a society. It evokes sympathy, sense of empathy and identity with both Okolo and Tuere. Tuere is, unarguably, the propelling force in Okolo's drive towards martyrdom and heroism. The strong protection and spiritual cover she provides Okolo from the beginning to the end of the novel is a validating evidence of her principal role in the joint struggle for spiritual revival, social renovation, political transformation and the awakening of Amatu people's minds and conscience.

One of the principal points which I wish to decipher from the text of Okara's *The Voice* is to ask the perplexing question: Whose is the "voice" in the fictional world of the text? Is *the voice* Okolo's as claimed by some critics? Is the "voice" Tuere's? Is the "voice" both Okolo's and Tuere's? These are critical questions that only a careful reading of this semantically versatile and semi-otically coded novel can reveal. The first significant "voice" fore-grounded in the novel is the impersonal and initially anonymous "voice" that "held" Okolo while he was being pursued by the angry mob:

Okolo ran and as he ran past, a voice-held him. "Come in," it said, "come in quickly." In Okolo went, instinctively and in the gloom, stood, panting (p. 28).

Once we agree that the "voice" here is metonymic, then we may also invariably agree that it is metonymic of the female speaker of *the voice*. The "voice"

that “held” Okolo came from Tuere’s hut, where she lives as a recluse. And it is *the voice* of human love, protection and truth.

This anonymous voice comes from Tuere’s hut, and we soon discover it is the protective voice of a “mother-figure,” Tuere herself, offering Okolo a strong spiritual fortification. This first sign of identity of the “voice” makes the objective reader believe that the “voice” is associated with Tuere. Shortly after this, Seitu, a character, defies Tuere’s spiritual ability to protect Okolo, and addresses her as a member of the crowd, “You can do nothing to us” (p. 32). However, the omniscient narrator, presumably Okara himself, comments: “Seitu still at the back of the crowd” was “making himself *the voice* of the crowd” (p. 32). Thus, we see Seitu as an impostor or impersonator who is pretending to be *the voice* of reason in the society. The “voice of the crowd” becomes a voice of negation, the anti-thesis of the positive voice of reason, justice and protection that came from Tuere’s hut.

It is for this positive and immortal voice of reason that any new reading of the novel should seek identity and definition, a feat I hope to have demonstrated. Okolo boldly labels himself *the voice* from “the locked up insides of the people,” when Tuere who obviously has more foresight than him foretells him the futility of his search for “it,” saying:

How do you expect to find it when fear has locked up the insides of the low and the insides of the high are filled up with nothing but yam? Stop looking for it. Stop suffering yourself (p. 30).

Tuere’s counsel to Okolo can easily be mistaken for advice to give-up his search for social renovation and reformation of his society and people. It is hardly so. African thoughts and meditative sensibilities differ from the European thinking and reception of meaning. At the end of the novel, we Africans know that Tuere’s statement becomes prophetically true as Okolo fails to find “it,” even loses his life, but succeeds to bequeath the immortal voice of reason to the society as a legacy. I cannot gullibly accept that Okolo’s is the “voice” in the novel even though his name means “*the voice*.” Okolo is a male principle character. Hence, it is possible to assume that his and not Tuere’s should be *the voice*, the immortal voice of reason in Amatu. This is as if to further build on the foundation of patriarchy in the society. While he was engulfed by the thick social and moral darkness of Sologa, his land of refuge, Okolo was guided and taught by *the voice* of a “mother-figure”:

As Okolo stood on the soil of Sologa trying to pierce the thickness of the night with his eyes, a voice close to his ears startled him with a whisper (p. 74) (emphasis mine).

The “voice close” to Okolo’s “ears” is *the voice* of Tuere, and if not, obviously of a female personality or a disembodied feminine gender which speaks to Okolo in his dilemma. *The voice* whispers: “I have not the big thing between

us forgotten. You will of my doings hear concerning it” (p. 75). The anonymous female voice is unmistakably that of “the shadowy figure of a woman gripping a girl by the hand” who “slid into the night, a black night like the back of a cooking pot” (p. 75). It is, therefore, obvious that Okolo is fraternizing with a female personality in the pursuit of his messianic course.

At the end of the novel, “Tuere still Okolo’s hand gripping entered her hut and Okolo followed like one who knows not what to do with himself” (p. 126). Here again the reader will see that Tuere is given a more symbolic recognition as she holds Okolo’s hand as if he was an adolescent boy. They both die (triumphant in spirit) tied back to back – as if in a joint struggle. They are a joint hero and heroine of the novel. Owing to the intense fictional metaphor, both functional and decorative, used by Okara to characterize Tuere’s personal frame, the cautious, deeply psychoanalytical reader is, most likely, to feel the impact from the female antagonist, more than from Okolo who earlier critics had misread to be Okara’s hero in *The Voice*. It is incontrovertible that the novel suggests a bi-sexual and bi-gender struggle in the social-cultural and political emancipation of neocolonial Africa. The novel propagates a theory of humanization from the perspective of sexual balance and equilibrium. It is indeed a bi-sexual and co-sexual text.

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