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**Devaluation of the Feminine Worth through Poverty:  
Examples from Grace Ukala's the *Broken Bond* and Elechi  
Amadi's *Estrangement* (Pp. 140-153)**

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## **Abstract**

*Poverty is fast becoming a global phenomenon that has taken a new dimension throughout the world and in Africa in particular. The western world as well as their media portray Africa and Africans in terms of backwardness and often showcase the poverty level of her populace. This is because during family skirmishes, communal clashes, as well as inter/intra*

*tribal wars, women and children bear the brunt of these unfortunate situation as they are forced to vacate their homes, abandon their meager resources and food in search of same in order to keep body and soul together. During this process, they are violated, abused physically and sexually, while some are inevitably forced into juvenile marriage as well as prostitution as means of survival. This paper seeks to elucidate the causes of poverty among women and also proffer solutions to the problems that poverty can generate. The paper also rejects the feminization of poverty, if women are given equal opportunities in life to proof their mettle.*

### **Preamble**

Poverty is a scourge that has disrupted human life and truncated family/societal growth and development. It is widely acclaimed that women and children are the poorest set of people throughout the world. Despite women's effort to raise themselves above the poverty line through farming, trading, working as domestics, sewing, hair dressing and other vocations, most women have remained poor due to domestic pressures from the family, home and society. Women's productive capacity is limited in the public sphere because they are often marginalized, exploited, discriminated against and further impoverished by the men they encounter. The central theme of poverty is therefore the state of inadequacy of essential needs of life. Poverty according to Imo Emenyi (2006:91) refers to "living in a state of severe want, where the basic needs of life are inaccessible".

Emenyi (2006) cites Pearce and Mc Adoo's (1981:17) claim that women are poor for female causes

...women, especially minority women, may be poor for some of the same reasons as men, but few men become poor because of female causes. Men generally do not become poor because of divorce, sex role socialization, sexism or of course pregnancy. Indeed some lift themselves out of poverty by the same means that plunge women into it. The divorce that frees a man from the financial burdens of a family may result in poverty for his ex-wife and the children.

John Santrock (2003:482) corroborates the above assertion when he posits that "among the reasons for the high poverty rate of single mothers are

women's low pay, infrequent awarding of alimony payment, and poorly enforced child support by fathers". In most part of Africa, the marriage founders, the men often abandon the children, irrespective of their number to the women. They care less whether the woman is economically capable of carrying the heavy weight dropped on her shoulders.

Again, most women are full time housewives and this singular factor further adds to their economic powerlessness and poverty. They tend to depend on men for their well-being. Death of a spouse, parents or a sibling can plunge women and children into excruciating poverty. It is against this backdrop that poverty has been perceived as a comprehensive socio-economic virus that constitutes one of the greatest afflictions of mankind. In Africa, poverty wears a human face because it is endemic. In Nigeria, the mass poverty of the people can be associated with the social, economic, political, ecological and cultural policies and processes. The United Nations sees poverty in the perspective of people living on less than a dollar per day. Other reasons advanced for the high rate of poverty in Africa and Nigeria in particular include exorbitant cost of living as a result of inflation, high rate of unemployment, government's failure to provide basic social amenities, early child marriage, ill-health, neglectful parenting, low level of education, reckless spending, alcoholism, illiteracy and low level of education among others.

### **Devaluation of the Feminine Worth through Poverty: Example from Grace Ukala's *The Broken Bond***

Grace Ukala's *The Broken Bond* examines the dialectic of the proletarian fiction. Titi Adepitan (2006), avers that *The Broken Bond* dives into the steamy life of the Nigerian nouveaux – riches with the crusading sense of indignation that many Nigerians readily recognize. Belinda is the heroine of *The Broken Bond*. Her late mother, recognizing the importance of education insists that she gets some formal education up to university level. Belinda's hope is truncated when her mother dies. In this respect, Belinda's mother subscribes to Nkechi Okoli's (2008: 61) claim that "with sound functional education, women would gain economic power in terms of good job and income which in turn determines their social and political power".

Bello, Belinda's father is laid off from work. He squanders his meagre resources on alcohol. He has no financial resources to fall back on. He can not feed, clothe or pay his rent. His children are deprived and vulnerable. Hitherto, Teresa, his late wife had been the breadwinner. This validates

Chioma Opara's (2004:117) claim that "the pain of poverty has been borne by women in patriarchal and capitalist societies all over the world". Belinda becomes the breadwinner, as she continues her late mother's business of hawking cooked food in order to feed the family and fund her brother's education. Ogbujah and Davies (2008:25) note that "the economic situation of the Nigerian women is not any better than her socio-political woes. Post independence Nigeria is still being governed by conservative men whose policies on women, like those of other patriarchal societies, systematically stifle their economic growth...".

Poverty is the major cause of Belinda's mother's death. Dr. Oweh who was supposed to treat her, according to another patient "has no milk of human kindness in him. He doesn't treat poor people, you know, he is the big man's doctor. He only treats those who pay him heavy consultation fee" (*The Broken Bond*, p.6). Coincidentally, the rich man in question is Chief Ojo, Belinda's landlord. He too like the doctor showed no sympathy for his poor tenant, Teresa. Chief Ojo's treatment of the poor further expands Marxist criticism which examines a work in relation to the totality of reality, human history, inter-relationship as well as class struggle (Nkoju, 1999:124). Chief Ojo had been scheming and planning to marry the young Belinda but the latter's mother had bluntly refused. Ojo is portrayed as a "capitalist hunter" to borrow Chioma Opara's (2004:47) expression.

Bello on his part wants his daughter to prostitute herself or to "sell" her as a mere commodity to the highest bidder since he is in a hurry to alleviate himself from festering poverty. Belinda is quick to assert her selfhood: "What? Do you think I am an article for sale?" (*The Broken Bond*, p.3). Bello's attitude calls to mind Brownfield Copeland in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, who is also an incorrigible alcoholic/debtor. Even when Henry Uzomaka the son of a rich capitalist proposes to Belinda, Bello out of share greed/ poverty insists on a dowry of fifteen thousand naira. Belinda is taken aback by her father's attitude, while the latter reasons further that

when the time comes, my daughter and I find a rich man to marry you, you will marry him whether you like it or not. If you remain foolish and stubborn, I shall tie a rope around your neck like a goat and drag you to his house.... I have sold all I had before; plots of land, motor cycle everything. You are the only

worthy possession that I have, and I intend to make good money out of you!..." (*The Broken Bond*, p. 15).

The bond and blood oath between Belinda and her lover Henry is broken when the latter relocates to Ibadan and impregnates Cynthia.

Again the issue of class dichotomy and exposure underpins the relationship between these two young lovers. It is against this back-drop that Susan Gubar (1982:84) writes that "blood wedding transforms the marriage bed into a coffin in which the virgin is sacrificed" Ukala's work, therefore resonate with pain, betrayal and fatalism. Belinda takes Henry's betrayal and infidelity in good faith. Ogbujah and Davies (2008) capture this when they reason that "male sexual vices are often overlooked while female infidelity is often treated with utmost contempt and hospitality".

Using Bello's excruciating poverty as a stronghold, Chief Ojo ejects Bello and his two children on Christmas Eve for failing to pay his over three years rent. In desperation, therefore, Belinda agrees to marry Chief Ojo so as to have a roof over their heads, protect her family from shame, and the fear of losing her brother to poverty and bad company among others.

In marrying Chief Ojo, Belinda acquiesces to her father's scheme of things and joins Chief's polygamous family. This marriage however, is a come-down for young Belinda. Opara (2004:47) reasons that "this could be a deliberate attempt on the author's part to underscore flagrant capitalist accumulation and concomitant oppression of the less privilege in society, which is regarded as outright theft by socialist Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiongo". This is clearly an example of forced marriage. Literature is replete with several examples of forced marriages. In *The Last of The Strong Ones* by Akachi Eseigbo, Onyekozuru is forced into a loveless marriage to an old man. This is Edna's plight in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of The People*. In Fatou Keita's novel, *Rebelle*, the heroine, Malimouna has to contend with forced juvenile marriage. Malimouna according to Aduke Adebayo (2008:11) "commits a sacrilege by beating up the old man, disallowing him to consummate the marriage and fleeing on the night of her marriage, to the consternation of the whole village which had never witnessed such a rebellion". This assertion gives credence to Helen Chukwuma's (1999:81) claim that "marital stress starts with the choice of a marriage partner and in most traditional societies, the choice is made for the girl". This critic adds that young girls/ wives labour under very stressful condition due to lack of

choice. This type of marriage, according to Chukwuma, is contracted for economic gains, usually to alleviate the burden of economic indebtedness on the part of the parents and as such the girls become the media of exchange as in Belinda's case.

Belinda is rendered helpless by the wicked machination of patriarchy. Ukala's work falls into the rubric of what the researchers view as slavery as poverty instigates lack of respect for humans. This paradigm "reveals several things about the status of a woman. First, she is like an acquisition and the like of a commodity which you need money for. Further, she has to be cut, dislodged and broken off to feed another" (Chukwuma, 1999:83).

This type of marriage further affects the women concerned. In Belinda's case, she suffers from fear, supernatural/ nocturnal attacks pregnancy miscarriage and she almost becomes paranoid. Chief Ojo had earlier used his money to lure his second wife, Rebecca. Poverty seems to loom large in this story and young women are preys of the trapping of capitalism. Belinda asserts her selfhood when she refuses to swear to Chief Ojo's "Okirigba", a juju that will bind her forever to him, despite threats from her father and Chief Ojo. The latter wants to imprison Belinda in his "harem". His home is like an airless cave where the women are locked. Ezeigbo (1999: 137) recall that "the patriarchal set up allows men to "imprison" their wives as Rochester did to Bertha in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) or as Antoinette was imprisoned by her husband in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)". Belinda's assertion makes Chief Ojo batter her mercilessly. For allowing Belinda escape, Chief Ojo in his frustration commits a sacrilege by battering his poor old night-guard. The poor man is afraid of losing his job and begs for forgiveness. This again is a clear demonstration of poverty which enables the rich to humiliate the poor.

In a dramatic twist, Bello regains his selfhood. He fights and knocks down Chief Ojo, the "Collosus", who dominates and bestrides his life and that of his family for battering his daughter. He returns Chief Ojo's house/ car keys and thus asserts his manhood and regains his freedom. For the first time his children are proud of him. He also stops drinking. Ukala writes that "Chief Ojo was terribly humiliated by Belinda's action and her father's strange reaction. He felt as if a very big and wicked hand had forcefully pushed him off the peak of a very high mountain. He pictured himself with all his bulk, tumbling down helplessly like a jute sack of garri and on-lookers jeering mercilessly at him..." (*The Broken Bond*, p.165).

In a similar vein Johnbull also liberates himself from the clutches of poverty and dependency. He buys a saloon car on hire purchase for his business. He is also ready to repay the dowry Chief Ojo paid on his sister, since the dowry according to Grace Okereke (1997:140) is a fetter chaining woman to man. Women who want to end bad marriages often return dowries in order to be completely free e.g. Ibekwe's second wife Ibia in Amadi's *Estrangement* returns her dowry.

Regina Chukwu, Belinda's crony, subscribes to prostitution in order to free herself from poverty. It is for this reason that Simone de Beauvoir (1972:90) contends that "a man views the woman as a sexual partner, a producer, an erotic object – another through which he sees himself". Regina is satisfied to be the mother of Dick's only son. Ebele, the latter's wife has six daughters for him. Having all female children is not complementary in African milieu because in Africa, emphasis is placed on male children to populate the lineage. Orabueze (2004:108) encapsulate this better when she states that "the African woman carries a double yoke; to have plenty of children and to have male children in the majority....the birth of boys gives more happiness and unity in a home than that of girls..."

### **Devaluation of the Feminine Worth through Poverty: Example from Elechi Amadi's *Estrangement***

Amadi's *Estrangement*, like Ukala's novel is a realistic portrayal of women's lots under the stress of poverty. Many critics have commended Amadi's work. Among them is Oladele Taiwo, (1976: 112) who praises Amadi for "appropriate language and setting as well as fidelity to the period and details that establish the feeling of reality". On her part, Juliet Okonkwo (1985:13) strongly commends Amadi's realism by comparing him with the teacher of cultural rehabilitation, Chinua Achebe in his ability to evoke authentic village life. Eustace Palmers (1977) states that Amadi's works evinces an almost exact copy of a village life.

*Estrangement* is Amadi's fourth novel which depicts the activities of the Nigerian civil war. The heroine of the novel is Alekiri, whose "husband Ibekwe is trapped behind Biafran lines during the civil war" (Eko, 1991:96). Alekiri is forced into a relationship with a soldier, Major Dansuku. The need to survive war situations of rape, poverty among others drives this hitherto good wife into the embrace of this soldier. The civil war had dealt a big blow on the people as they return home. Ebele Eko (1995:98-99) reports that:

instead of healthy farmers and tappers, we see hordes of wretched and miserable refugees trooping back to even more wretched and miserable bullet-ridden houses... The story is the same everywhere, stories of looted houses, broken doors and windows, scattered market stalls, wanton and thoughtless destructions. Victims of the war are brought together in a quasi-communal tie that parodies the village tie of cultural and blood relationships.

Amadi like Isidore Okpewho and Festus Iyayi depicts instances of the “fallen women”. Rose Acholonu (1995:200) captures this idea when she reiterates that “these works rather than demonstrate the hierarchy or moral turpitude of these wives, clearly emphasize their sterling qualities of proven enduring love, conjugal chastity (at least before the fall) their staunch determination to withstand the storm of temptation and finally their heart felt sorrow and shame after the fall. Thus viewed, these wives cannot but win our sympathetic understanding as human beings at odds with the problems of human nature in human circumstances”.

In *Estrangement*, poverty is as a result of the civil war while in *The Broken Bond*, the stress is the natural outcome of a life subjected to prolonged abject poverty. The stress in *Estrangement* is made critical by the prolonged physical separation of the spouse. Ibekwe is acrimonious and this makes reconciliation impossible despite intervention by people and the women’s group Omirinya. “Ibekwe’s inability to handle the crisis in his family amicably results directly from the rabid male arrogance and lack of humanism” (Acholonu, 1995:201). He batters Alekiri mercilessly. Amadi writes that

Alekiri, convinced he was going to look for another stick, grabbed his penis. Alarmed Ibekwe struck her even harder but that only tightened her grib ... as she squeezed the shorts and its content, Ibekwe had an erection which improved her hold. His pain worsened. He slumped from his squatting position to the ground and lay facing his wife. A classic love position had turned into one of bitterness and agony (*Estrangement*, p. 85).



Again Acholonu (1999:99) notes that “wife battering is a very common domestic violence which is well orchestrated in the African novel. Classical case in point include: Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana*, Buchi Emecheta’s *Ada Obi in Second Class Citizen*, Firdaus in Nawal el Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*”. Ibekwe’s ego is deflated and he is humiliated by the very woman he’d set out to disgrace. This paradox enable the author/reader empathize with Alekiri and emasculates Ibekwe.

Poverty and hardship made people steal during the war e.g. Ibekwe (the self acclaimed prince) stole yam to prevent his wife and daughter from starving to death. When he returns from the war and finds his wife with another man, he did not care to find out the condition under which Alekiri becomes a soldier’s woman. He simply concludes that Alekiri is a prostitute. The latter’s case evokes Mumbi’s example in Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat*, who out of poverty and the need to survive as well as help her family during the Emergency slept with Karanja and had a child for him, thus estranging herself from Gikonyo her husband. Florence Orabueze (2004:113) is of the opinion that “the same culture that allows a married man to commit adultery frowns at a married woman doing so. In the past, an adulterous wife was guilty of desecration of the land that called for its cleansing with some rites. In contrast, an African man is not expected to bother about whether his wife knows of his illicit affairs with other women”. It is against this backdrop that Mama Iyabo, Alekiri’s crony, clearly and boldly states the obvious that “... you are not the only wife who is in this position. Your husband should understand and forgive you. After all, I do not think he kept away from women throughout the time he was away. Men are lucky because they cannot become pregnant” (*Estrangement*, p. 20).

The embattled Ibekwe steals Alekiri’s “dirty money” in order to punish her and kick start his business, while “his fellow traders envied him as his shed filled with expensive goods” (*Estrangement*, p. 114). In other words, Alekiri’s money alleviates Ibekwe’s poverty. This ironic twist is what the latter acknowledges towards the end of the novel. Another man recalls how he disguised as a Reverend Father to avoid being conscripted into the army. He later joins the Welfare Team and is sent to work in one of the food distribution centres. In this way, he is able to escape poverty and survive during the war with members of his family.

The end of the war further impoverished many people, who lost human and material resources. It is indeed a harrowing experience for many as they were

reduced to beggars. This same war had enriched and empowered people in big cities. Christie, Alekiri's sister in Lagos is able to enhance herself through prostitution. She tells her sister: "look at our father sleeping on the floor and eating from broken plates" (*Estrangement*, p. 62). Alekiri, thanks to Major Dansuku, provides for her family after the war. She loads the borrowed van from Mama Iyabo with food stuff which she distributes to members of her family, neighbours and other hungry villagers. Her magnanimity and generosity win her admiration from all and sundry.

On her part, Christie tries to rehabilitate her father – she renovates his dilapidated and bullet-ridden house, rebuilds the reception hall and brings succours to other impoverished members of her family. Kinika (Alekiri and Christie's father) is able to flaunt his newly acquired wealth. In fact he offers Ibekwe, his son-in-law 'cola and bottle of expensive brandy" (*Estrangement*, p. 140). In so doing, he asserts his selfhood like Bello in *The Broken Bond*.

Indices of poverty are glaring in Oyia's family. Oyia, who had lost her husband and two children during the war, is happy to enter into a polygamous marriage with Ibekwe. Oyia's poverty is so pronounced that in her twenties, she looks older due to farm work and hunger. Her palms are rough and calloused by years of contact with the hoe. Privileged to marry Ibekwe from the city, this village rustic is not contented to enjoy electricity and television but demands more attention from her husband. Oyia's transformation, assertion and need to transcend poverty is commendable. She is a traditionalist, who subscribes to the cooking/sleeping arrangement in a polygamous setting and refuses to be intimidated by Ibekwe or Ibia, his second wife.

Alekiri's decision to further her education and alleviate herself from poverty shows her rejection of feminization of poverty. Even the rustic Oyia contributes to the "Isusu" group so as to enable her take care of herself. Belinda's effort at food selling is a way of alleviating herself from poverty despite the fact that her father's reckless life weighed her down. Both Amadi and Ukala equip their heroines with education which will help them appropriate the whip hand. Education is a "fillip to economic empowerment which is starkly contrasted with poverty and deprivation" (Opara, 2004:118).

### **Conclusion**

Today, most parts of the world indeed Africa have been ravaged by poverty. Nkechi Okoli (2008:58) reason that "sub Saharan Africa has experienced

malaria, food shortage resulting in malnutrition, conflict and wars, natural disasters causing enormous human suffering, material devastations, human resources depletion and damage to social and cultural fabrics of nations concerned". It is women and children who suffer during these ugly times as depicted in the texts treated in this paper. What is central to these novels is how the women (Belinda, Alekiri, etc) struggle to transcend their limitations in the patriarchal society which threatens to annihilate them. Ukala and Amadi idolize the sterling qualities of their heroines before the "fall". These authors join issues with Paul Sartre, cited by Njoku (1999:123) to affirm that "works of art are document which must be used in solving human problems ... an artist must be conscious of the problems of society and must champion the cause of the masses or an ideology".

At the Copenhagen World summit, the one hundred and thirty-four countries that participated vowed to renew their commitment to eradicate poverty globally. Nigeria participated, yet poverty is still on the increase. The Nigerian government has embarked on several poverty alleviation programmes. They include National Poverty Eradication Programme (NADEP). Its main thrust includes Youth Empowerment Scheme, Rural Infrastructure Development Scheme as well as Natural Resources Development and Conservation Scheme. Others include the G8 Leaders' Summit, aimed at creating awareness of the need for and debt relief as well as fairer trade deal for Africa. The "Live 8" concert held in countries like London, Tokyo, Johannesburg, Paris, Rome etc were antipoverty campaigns. Some other poverty reduction schemes include the (FOA/UNESCO 2004) – education for Rural Development, aimed at building awareness on the importance of education for rural dwellers for achieving the millennium development goals. The need to provide food and shelter for Nigerians led to the founding of programmes like Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Green Revolution, Better Life for Rural Women, Directorate for Employment, etc. How these schemes/programmes have impacted on the life of the poor is yet to be determined.

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