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**GENDERED IDENTITY AND FEMINISM: CROSS CULTURAL ISSUES IN
TWENTIETH CENTURY AFRICAN AND AMERICAN WOMEN'S POETRY
— OGUNDIPE LESLIE AND ADRIENNE RICH.**

Contemporary feminism has been perceived as sometimes advocating the right to be equal, and sometimes the right to be different and unique. In this respect, two perspectives emerge. First, there is the argument that a feminist politics based on the premise of equality, that is, equal treatment, equal rights, equal work and pay will assimilate women to men, and erase gender difference and create a gender neutral society. Whether or not this is real equality in the terms in which feminists want it, is still a point of debate. Second, the question of whether or not a practice of feminism based on the ideal of difference, in which women are not just subjects to male defined values and institutions but specific individuals who have a lot to offer just like men, will exacerbate the notion of women's otherness, also still remains an issue. Whatever the case, role attributions remain gendered as can be seen in Twentieth Century women's poetry in both Africa and America. This creates differences which are therefore a clear starting point and looks forward to equality as a natural objective. Equality which is advocated in poetry by presenting gendered roles as something worth discarding can be considered a goal to be achieved. The major questions which arise as we read these poems are these: if equality and differences are considered as dichotomous terms which are mutually exclusive, what other relationships can be found within and between them? Can there be a distinctive mode of feminist scholarship which will treat women's equality to men as a means to the goal of female difference? An analysis of the poetry of these two women poets seems to propose some options.

Role attributions relegating the woman to a wife and a mother and consequently into a subject and a victim, exist in American patriarchal culture as can be discerned in the poetry of Adrienne Rich. In African women's poetry, these are even more poignantly felt since the African woman about whom this poetry is, suffers under the yoke of a triple burden: that of poverty, race and gender. These are aptly demonstrated in the poetry of many female poets like Ogunديpe-Leslie. In this study, American women's poetry exempli-

fied by Adrienne Rich's poetry will be examined in comparison with African women's poetry exemplified by the poetry of Molaria Ogundipe Leslie, to answer the questions listed above.

Rich's "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law," (1963) presents a sad picture of the depreciation that can accrue from the repression of women so that they fit conventional roles of wives and mothers. In stanza one, the addressee is a once very beautiful woman who is now "moldering like a wedding cake, / heavy with useless experience." This is an outstanding poem because it portrays a critique of consciousness. It does this by analyzing the mental and cultural structures that have contributed to carving out an image for women, and then portraying the resultant state of affairs and its debilitating effects on women. It is a critique of the way patriarchal culture attributed a "womb-centeredness" theory to women and confined them to emotionality rather than reasonableness. In fact, an editorial in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (1854) warned against assigning roles in public offices to women, stating that women have a predominance of feelings over the intellect:

Her flaccid muscles, tender skin, highly nervous organisation, and aptitude for internal injury, decide the question of offices involving hard bodily labour, while the predominance of instinct over reason, or of feeling over intellect, as a rule unfits her for judicial or legislative command. Her power is essentially a silent and unseen influence, her functions are those of a wife and mother. (Dorenkamp *et al.* 3)

In the very first line of the poem, Rich pits her *persona* against these canons of subjectivity and oppression, when she ironically says: "I had been taught that poetry should be universal, which meant of course non-female" ("Snapshots of A Daughter-in- Law"). The title of the poem itself is a somewhat ironic reference to the "sources" of authority, which crush the feminine genius: her marital status and her family relationships.

The three poems of the first section discuss the intricate but limited patterns of the lives of actual women, surely of the poet's entourage. The mother relives the memories of past elegance: she was a "belle" with "henna-coloured hair" and skin like a "peachbud" and had even acted a "Chopin pre-

lude.” However, the suggestion here is that, because she was conditioned never to think but only to feel, all her experience is “useless”:

Your mind now, moldering like a wedding cake
 heavy with useless experience rich
 with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
 crumbling to pieces under the knife edge
 of mere fact. In the prime of your life.
 (“Snapshots of A Daughter-in- Law”)

So her “crumbling mind” is not a result of old age, for she is still in the prime of her life. It is the result of her preoccupation with the unimportant aspects of life, like rumour, suspicion, gossip, and fantasy. Because her mind shuns facts, the poet seems to imply, it cannot stand under the knife-edge of factual analysis. In the third poem, the speaker seems to posit the negative result when women relegate reason to the backyard of their consciousness and depend on feeling. In flat, bold, almost vulgar words, the speaker shocks the reader with: “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grips her, she becomes.” The insinuation here is that any woman who tries to reason will come face to face with the stark reality of male oppression. For this reason, a man, whether husband or lover, is described as a monster, while the penis is presented as a “beak” which “grips” the woman and she becomes with child. Love-making therefore becomes a painful process aimed not at mutual pleasure but only at begetting children. In this process, it is the woman who is the victim. It is she who is “gripped” by the “beak” of the “monster” she sleeps with. It is for this reason, the poem seems to insinuate, that it would be better for women not to think.

Similarly, motherhood is presented as oppressive because wives and mothers are required to repress the reality of what they experience in order to preserve a generous unruffled surface. They are thus presented as victims of the conflict of what they really feel and what society suggests, they should feel, and it is for that reason that their minds disintegrate. In the poem, the daughter-in-law tries to differentiate herself from the older woman, but both are in fact disintegrating. The younger woman hears unseen voices

but with a profound self-denying perversity, represses these voices that call on her to rebel or to be selfish:

Nervy, glowering, your daughter
wipes the teaspoons, grows another way
Banging the coffee into the sink
she hears the angels chiding and looks out
past the raked gardens to the sloppy sky
Only a week since they said: *have no patience*.

The next time it was: *be insatiable*
Then: save yourself; others you cannot save.
("Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law")

Notwithstanding, the energies that have been pushed down through repression must be let out one way or another. The younger woman resorts to self-torture: "Sometimes she's let the tapstream scald her arm / a match-burn to her thumbnail." But generally, women resort to violence against each other. For, unwittingly, the repressed anger resurfaces and exposes the monstrous dimensions of their self-hatred through hostility to each other:

Two handsome women, gripped in argument
each proud, acute, subtle, I hear scream
across the cut glass and majolica
like Furies cornered from their prey :
The argument *ad feminam*, all the old knives
that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours
ma semblable, ma sœur!

The speaker tries in the next section to explain this female frustration by referring to and analyzing classic texts which evoke the history of women's conditions and the fate of their gifts. One of the allusions is to Emily Dickinson's poem "My Life had Stood a Loaded Gun":

... Reading while waiting
for the iron to heat,
writing My Life had Stood – a Loaded Gun –
in that Amherst pantry while the jellies boil and scum
or more often,

iron-eyed and beaked and purposed as a bird
dusting everything on the whatnot every day of life.

From the above lines, it can be seen that even a woman as powerful as the poet Emily Dickinson, is obliged to write within the interstices of domestic life. This is evidence that male dominated society regards domesticity as one of the social expectations that shape a woman's personality and to which her gifts must conform. In the next section, there is also evidence that the demands of physical beauty pose another of such expectations, requiring women to keep a calm unruffled surface:

She shaves her legs until they gleam
like petrified mammoth tusks
when to the lute Corrina sings
neither words nor music are her
own, only the long hair dripping
over her cheek ... ("Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law")

These grotesque lines present women as idolized objects, objectified by the need to preserve a sleek and beautiful surface and to please. Neither the words of Corinna's song or the music are hers. Hers is only the beauty. She is only an object.

In this poem therefore, we see a tripartite perspective of the social expectations, which expose patriarchal culture's oppression of women. Firstly, there is a combination of repressed power and actual powerlessness, secondly, there is an acute bitterness in those prevented from full fruition and resulting into female violence against her kind, and lastly an interest in human realism which is a consequence of women's utter dependence on love. These three oppressive expectations are summed up in the two last sections of the poem:

Not that it is done well, but
that it is done at all ...
would we, darlings, resign it if we could ?
our blight has been our sinecure :
mere talent was enough for us
glitter in fragments and rough drafts

sigh no more, ladies
 time is male
 and in his cups drinks to the fair
 bemused by gallantry, we hear
 our mediocrity over praised,
 indolence read as abnegation,
 slattern thought styled intuition
 every lapse forgiven, our crime
 only to cast too bold a shadow
 or smash the mold straight off. (“Snapshots of a daughter-in-Law”)

From the above lines, we see not only a summary of the oppression American women undergo in patriarchy but another and an even more acute dimension of women’s subjugation: women are praised only when their works do not call male superiority and patriarchal analysis into question. Women are adored because of, and not in spite of, their failures. It is an apt critique of both the patriarchal culture’s perceptions of wives and mothers and of women’s acceptance of such perceptions.

In “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” Rich therefore does not only produce vivid “snapshot” moments of the victimization experience. She also presents, as it were, some aspects of female reaction to this victimization. In the first instance, the older woman of the poem tries to deny her state of victimhood and to suppress into her unconscious, the anger and frustration resulting from it. The effect is obvious, for as Margaret Atwood, writes:

those who follow this strategy for coping with victimization are afraid to lose whatever advantages they have by exploring the true nature of their status and tend instead to identify with the victimizer. If they do feel (express) their anger it vents itself against fellow victims, particularly against those who tend to bring them into fuller consciousness of their victimization. (Gilbert and Gubar 270)

The two women in Rich’s poem are therefore at odds with each other following their strategy in responding to their victimisation. Their anger has been repressed into their subconscious minds and the resulting violence is aimed not against the male oppressor but first against themselves, and then against each other. In the first case, we read an act of self-torture in the fol-

lowing lines: “she’s let the tap stream scald her arm / a match burn to her thumbnail.” In the second case, the two women are at each other’s throats: “all the old knives / that have rusted in my back, I drive in yours, / “ma semblable, ma sœur” (“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law”).

Rich’s “Snapshots of a Daughter-In Law” can be compared with Ogundipe Leslie’s “On Reading an Archaeological Article” (1982), a poem which continues to recommend a bold confrontation of the problems which women encounter in the institutions of marriage and motherhood. The poem alludes to the legend of the reign of the Egyptian Queen, Nefertiti. In the first stanza, this powerful queen is described in picturesque geographical images:

They would say that she with the neck like a duiker’s
Whose breasts are the hills of Egypt
Who weeps the Nile from her eyes of antimony
Is but another cosmopolitan housewife.
 (“On Reading an Archaeological Article”)

The Queen is presented with such forcefulness that she comes across as the perfect embodiment of the whole Egyptian territory. Her neck is like a duiker’s, representing the long upturned tip of the map of the country; her breasts are the hills of the land; while the Nile, the longest river in the continent, flows from the queen’s tears as her “eyes of antimony” weep. Her grandeur can be likened to that of a woman as powerful as Emily Dickinson, which Rich presents in “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-law.” Just as Rich shows that a woman as great as Emily Dickinson could read or write only amidst the interstices of domesticity, so does Ogundipe Leslie show us in the lines above, that even a queen as powerful as the one described here still measures herself only by the tape of a patriarchal yardstick and considers herself as just “another cosmopolitan housewife.” Her role conditions her to “walk ten paces behind her Mr. Doe,” even though she is the ruler. The poem implies that though queen Nefertiti is a great ruler, as a wife, she must behave just like a housewife, and if she must consider herself smart, she must walk ten paces behind her husband, whoever he is.

This kind of representation shows that roles attributed to men and women, especially in the twentieth century, were gendered. This labelling is limiting to women who find themselves relegated to housewifery, in spite of their demonstrated economic and political prowess. The woman in this poem is therefore just an abject “other.” Although she is the ultimate political authority in Egypt, she is identified as devoid of male power. It is for this reason that the speaker cries out in the next stanza:

How long shall we speak to them
Of the goldness of mother, of difference without bane
How long shall we say another world lives
Not spinned on the axis of maleness
But rounded and wholed, charting through
Its many runnels its justice distributive.
 (“On Reading an Archaeological Article”)

Ogundipe Leslie truly believes in a world in which men and women should co-exist on equal terms, a world of “difference without bane... not spinned on the axis of maleness.” As she explains in an interview with Desirée Lewis,³ she is not concerned with “adversarial relationships with men or about men hating.” As she says, women give birth to men, raise them, marry them, and are related to them by blood,” so it would be pointless or sick to hate them.” What she decries is the eroding of the private and public spaces which ancient West African women had enjoyed. She says:

I discovered that the Yoruba woman had more private and public spaces and respected roles than pre-feminist American middle class women ... I am referring particularly to the status and roles of West African women that were diverse and relatively high, including the recognition and positive valuation of African women by our men outside marriage.

This brings another dimension to this discussion by showing that even in Africa, women used to be appreciated differently from East to West. While Susan Kiguli just showed the rural East African woman as more oppressed because she acquiesces in the face of her oppression, Ogundipe Leslie believes that it is the modern West African women who are oppressed because they became more burdened after the inculcation of the values of Western

colonial education. Both poets, however, want to point out that it is when women refuse to stand up for their rights that the institution of differences becomes unbearable.

But just like with Adrienne Rich's "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," the tone of "On Reading an Archaeological Article" exhibits a virulent anger at talented women who cannot use their political and social or artistic offices to improve the lot of women, and continue to view themselves as inferior to their male counterparts, in spite of their proven potentials. In "Snapshots..." Rich seems infuriated at Corrina, who has a distinguished artistic talent, but when she sings, neither the words nor the song are hers. She must reproduce what patriarchal male society has put in her mouth. Similarly, there is the lady who was so talented that she even acted a "Chopin Prelude." Yet, by foregoing reasoning and focusing only on her emotions, her mind depreciates. Queen Nefertiti in Ogundipe's poem has political power, but she does not use it to improve the lot of other women. She seems to accept that to succeed, she must walk ten paces behind her husband, not daring to oppose the male world. Both poets seem to be saying that no matter a woman's status in politics, economics, culture or other domains, she is still a victim of her roles of mother or wife, and that even if she carries out these functions faultlessly, she will always suffer from being the victims of segregation and discrimination. According to Ogundipe Leslie, in *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, the woman is:

falsely grandified with these tasks while all around, she is discriminated against, excluded from real power, exploited at all levels and derided most of the times in the society. (230)

There is, however, a major difference between the two poets and consequently the two poems. While Adrienne Rich is a lesbian who believes in a society of women living and loving themselves without recourse to men, Ogundipe-Leslie is not. This is the reason why in "Snapshots..." there is no mention of a man, though men are ominously present as the oppressors. But in "On Reading..." men are physically present as they physically op-

press: the queen must walk only behind her husband, though she is the ruler.

This mode of reasoning continues in “Antinoüs: the Diaries” (1963), in which Rich now reverts to the other extreme and presents a society devoid of women, in which men act out even the roles that traditionally belong to women. In it, Rich again vividly portrays the psychological and artistic rejection of the terms on which society “says” women must expend their existence. She does this through the mask of a man: Antinoüs – a beautiful youth, favorite boy of the emperor Hadrian, who drowned in the Nile, perhaps a suicide in A.D. 130. In the note to this poem Rich writes, “I let the young man speak for me.” In the poem, Antinoüs is presented as an inverted image of male lust, and also as a mirror of a decadent society, in fact, of patriarchal society:

If what I spew on the tiles at last,
helpless, disgraced, alone
is in part what I’ve swallowed from glasses, eyes
motion of hands, opening and closing mouths
isn’t it also dead goblets of myself
abortive, murdered, or never willed? (“Antinoüs”)

The poem opens with a typical picture of an autumn evening: leaves smeared on the pavements and into the entire landscape and all the other “old signs.” However, in this stanza, the poet uses this as a strong simile to present an image of male/female love relationships. The “sopping leaves” are rubbed into the landscape “as unguent on a bruise” and are brought indoors as people “bring flowers, enormous with the colours of the body’s secret parts.” As a man brings flowers to his lover, so are the leaves, which are spread out, on the landscape brought even indoors perhaps by the wind. Here, the love relationship between lovers is compared to the season of autumn in which leaves are generally smeared on the landscape, hereby highlighting male lust: the flowers the speaker imagines conjure in his mind the colours of the secret parts of his lover’s body. In the next lines, the fire of love burns in his bones and the desire for this fire to be put out sets his teeth on edge with ecstasy, until when the fire is put out:

Walking fast, fighting the fire
 that must die, light that sets my teeth on edge in joy
 till on the black embankment
 I'm a cart stopped in the reeds of time. ("Antinoös")

The image of the landscape smeared with dead leaves could also be read as an epitome of the decadent society in which the speaker lives; the leaves are not only lying on the landscape, they are "rubbed" into it and this picture captivates the mind's eye as the image of a deeper ill, especially because the painfulness of this rubbing is compared to that of "unguent on a bruise." This is a picture of moral and psychological decadence and its resultant malaise. This impression is made even clearer in the second stanza in which the speaker expresses even more viscerally a revulsion against the middle class suburban life which traps people either willingly or helplessly. It is the picture of a celebration in one of the middle class homes. In it, "fires snap," "heads are high," and there is "gold hair at napes of necks," "gold in glasses" and gold in the throat." Even the poetry presented here is the "poetry of furs and manners." In this society, the entrance of death does not disturb the merry-makers' feeble parody of a happy life – they watch on and callously continue their amorous pursuits:

why do I shiver then ? haven't I seen,
 over and over, before the end of an evening,
 the three opened coffins carried in and left in a corner ?
 haven't I watched as somebody cracked his shin
 on one of them, winced and hopped and limped
 laughing to lay his hands on a beautiful arm
 striated with hairs of gold, like an almond- shell ? ("Antinoös")

In the poem, there's no mention either of women or their speech. Yet they are present in the poem in the hidden symbols of sex objects. This could also be the poet's way of vividly presenting a society such as patriarchy has instituted, in which women have no place and no voice. Men act out even roles supposed to be acted out by women lovers. Men can then become lovers of other men. Paradoxically, this kind of society is so decadent that the young man Antinoös has to vomit "what he has swallowed from

glasses, eyes, motions of hands and the opening and closing of mouths,” as we can see in the last stanza of the poem, in which the speaker, as the poet’s mouthpiece, experiences such heightened revulsion at such a society that he feels like throwing up:

... for if I’m here it is by choice and when at last
 I smell my own rising nausea, feel the air
 tighten around my stomach like a surgical bandage
 I can’t pretend surprise. What is it I so miscarry?
 if what I spew on the tiles at last,
 helpless, disgraced, alone
 is in part what I have swallowed from glasses
 motions of hands, opening and closing of mouths
 isn’t it also dead goblets of myself
 abortive, murdered or never willed ? (“Antinoös”)

The poet’s choice of “Antinoös” as title and mouthpiece is therefore quite effective for at the end, the young lad actually committed suicide, may be from the inability to bear such a life of deceit. This life of single sex amorousness is quite an aberration in the African world view represented here by Ogundipe.

In Ogundipe-Leslie’s presentation of a middle class African society in “When Father Experience Hits with His Hammer” (1985), the prejudices are different both from the point of view of rural African women and from the point of view of middle class Western societies. In this poem, she continues to show that the African woman’s victimization is more poignantly felt by middle class colonially educated African women as she transcends the forces of patriarchal oppression. It is as if women’s oppression had been greatly fostered by notions inculcated into them by Western colonial education. In this poem, the speaker tells the story of middle class African women who are graduates from colonial mission schools. They have acquired some kind of appreciable education. They have either married prominently or become prominent in one way or another. They meet frequently to muse upon and talk about their shattered dreams, sorrows, frustrations and the various kinds of victimization which they experience as women, artists, wives, lovers, and mothers. In fact, the poet herself describes the poem as the “sto-

ry of the woman bourgeoisie.” The *persona* indicates that it is the story of their life as they “meet infrequently”

Trading our sorrows, stories, myths,
 Exchanging our marks of Cain,
 Our scarlet letters and dreams
 Aborted... (“When Father Experience Hits...”)

In a kind of stream of consciousness technique, the poem enacts a flashback of the reveries of these women, years before, when they were still in boarding school. But behind these reveries, there is the indication that Western education was not as “glorified” as it had been thought to be, considering that there, young African women were brainwashed into admiring Western values and models exclusively:

There we dreamt about
 the tall black and handsome
 like Heathcliff. Was he
 African to us? Did he look
 like the men we knew?
 Like our fathers and brothers?
 There would be no more polygamy
 In our world, no more pain,
 For we were special...
 Polygamy was for natives, illiterates
 And all such creatures. Our men would
 come a-gliding, clouds of snow behind them... (Ibid.)

The indication in the above lines is that the only reason why these middle-class women feel so terribly oppressed in their lives is because they were taught to regard African traditional values as primitive and worthy only for illiterates. Since they were never taught to admire their brothers and fathers, even their husbands do not match their dreams of the kinds of men they hoped to marry. They were made to understand that virtuous womanhood consisted of staying at home and being a cook, a housekeeper, a nurse, a secretary, or chattel to “Mr. husband.” The poem however shows the fallacy of this kind of education by showing that it was just a myth be-

cause even the Western womanhood which they sought to imitate is a “fancy class prison.”

Ignorant as we are
of the binds, the shackles,
the chattel life of the envied
Western woman, of middle class living,
Her hidden humiliations, emotional and legal. (Ibid.)

Western education, the poet seems to insinuate, was a tool for cultural imperialism with which African women became even more victimized. In fact, as Edward Ako notes,

If it is true that Britain used military might to subdue a good part of the world especially in the last part of nineteenth century, military victory constituted not the winning of the war, but of a battle and it were cultural texts to complete what military might had started. (1)

The *persona*, therefore, states that women who acquired colonial education became casualties of wars they knew nothing about. These kinds of women are contrasted with the true African women unspoiled by Western education and the latter seem stronger and more dignified because they own their time and themselves.

This comparison is indicated in the famous quotation which has become almost an icon of African womanist theorizing: “we seek the space / our mothers had, the space within and the space without, / spaces emotional and spaces economic, / not confoundable ... with charades of western chivalry.” They seek the spaces their mothers had, because life for the educated middle-class bourgeois West African women has been different and shockingly antithetical to all their dreams:

So thirty years after, we stare at
Each other with unbelieving eyes.
Casualties of wars we know not,
Children of Mother Experience
(or Father Experience)
Who hits with a hammer.

However, in their disenchantment, they continue to smile bleakly. Their grief is mutual. Their eyes shine with mutually integrated woe and they have become indentured to pain:

Gay in heroic suffering which we think
 Is our fate inalienable and our mother's fates.
 Or we hide our mutual griefs
 While strange lights glint in our eyes
 And suffering moves there like egg-yolk,
 And we smile and fantasize and lie
 And strut away to accept more....
 Perhaps Tomorrow, perhaps. ("When Father Experience Hits...")

The message in the poem is firmly anchored in oppositions that are both stated and implied. Ostensibly, there are oppositions in the behaviour of the women who continue to keep a cool countenance in the face of conventional signals of distress portrayed in phrases like "casualties of war," "who hits with a hammer," "mutual griefs," "woe," and "heroic suffering." Another glaring opposition is between the daydream of the women's youthful aspirations and the reality of their lives. In the former opposition, we find a typical reaction to victimization which Gilbert and Gubar (270), describe as the acknowledgment of victimization. The *persona* in this poem says that:

... while our
 eyes shine with mutually integrated
 woe or mutually integrated strength,
 Indentured to pain,
 Gay in heroic suffering which we think
 Is our fate inalienable and our mother's fates. (Ibid.)

Suffering is thus considered by these women as an act of destiny against which they have no strength. Just like the middle class men in Adrienne Rich's poem suffer for having abnegated women, the middle class women in Ogundipe-Leslie's poem suffer for having abnegated their culture. It is this cultural renunciation, Ogundipe-Leslie seems to imply, which has exacerbated the oppression of women by men. In an online interview with Desirée Lewis, she makes the point clearer:

We [African women] need to overcome our endemic inferiority complex towards Europe and things “white”, successfully implanted through our colonial education and its curricular...We should think from our epicenters of agency looking for what is meaningful, progressive and useful to us as Africans as we enrich ourselves with forerunning ideas from all over the world including Europe and America.

However, the poem also reveals a manipulation of the difference in sex/gender relations to assure the *status quo* of male domination. Even when women are successful or achieve the approval of the male society, they are still considered inferior to men simply because they have been taught that reproductive characteristics and activities peculiar to women are not as valorised as those peculiar to men. Thus, in patriarchy, everything biologically female is considered inferior. Sex is thus used to exclude women from the exercise of power and from the benefits of privilege. In their frustration, the women in “When Father Experience hits with His hammer” revert to their homes and children for solace:

Or we cling to the children
 And lie about them, weave
 Ourselves and reasons round
 their blameless necks
 claiming motherhood
 where only fear lurks. (“When Father Experience Hits...”)

While men use the institution of motherhood to victimize women, West African women also simultaneously enjoy motherhood as an experience in which they find solace from their frustrations. However, even in this consolation, the women (as shown in this poem) remain powerless and blame their powerlessness on their need to be good mothers. They cling to the responsibilities of caring for their children, using this excuse to weave the reasons for their rejection from society.

While in Adrienne Rich’s poem, women’s oppression stems solely from the sex divide indicated by the total exclusion of women from the poem, in Ogundipe-Leslie’s poem, it is obvious that African women’s oppression stems not only from their indigenous societies but also from the imperialistic

influences brought to bear on Africans through colonial Western education. The existentialist tension confronting African women, as they experience the limitations and lack of possibility to exercise their full potentialities, is thus partially blamed on the whole-hearted manner in which they imbibe Western notions of virtuous womanhood, which restricted women to the domestic sphere of home-making. What women in the poem seek is not limited to domestic space. They also seek the economic spaces that define their place in the universality of creation. But their acquired Western education acts in tandem with the patriarchal society of male domination and makes these women feel that to be limited to the domestic realm is to be favoured, like Western women seemed some years ago. However, this does not prevent them from the awareness that the domestic realm in the chivalric tradition is only a “fancy class prison,” which binds and “shackles” them.

The *persona* launches a virulent attack at these women who, after realizing their victimization, acquiesce in playing the roles of kitchen hands, mothers and lovers and seem to premise their life on the assumption that they can get on by seeking to cajole men. They have even become oblivious of their need to seek personal progress. They are less than women as they “giggle like babies,” and even less than human since they have to “scuttle back home / to [their] fancy class prisons to please more the masters / to win by cajoling / Seducing the oppressors and their demeaning systems.” Since it is animals that “scuttle,” the insinuation here is that the women have been rendered less human by their adherence to the forms of male oppression. This analysis falls in line with Ogundipe-Leslie’s theory in *Recreating Ourselves* that one of the mountains on the African woman’s back is the woman herself:

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of the interiorisation of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender... woman reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed. (36)

In “Antinöous: The Dairies”, Rich tries to show in a subtle ironic twist that a society in which women are totally unrepresented is nauseating, for women have their space and need to occupy it. Similarly, Ogundipe-Leslie is

involved in showing in “When Father Experience...” that African women’s relegation to the roles of motherhood and wifehood is inadequate. She decries this relegation and calls for a society in which women, wives, mothers, lovers, or whatever roles they occupy, can assert their innate resourcefulness in the private and public spheres. While not totally disparaging motherhood, the poem shows that African women are victimized by the society when it considers motherhood as a liability of their biological gender and not an asset promoting the social welfare of the family and the nation. Supporting this notion, Fatma Alloo of Tanzania is of the view that “as women, our role as homemakers gets trivialized and unacknowledged and our reproductive role is portrayed as our biggest liability” (18).

In “Diving into the Wreck,” Adrienne Rich’s speaker seems to have gained consciousness of how male perception of woman as the “other” has kept women entrapped in myths, which robs them of their intellectual, psychological, and emotional independence and therefore keeps them as victims. She then gathers her weapons: a loaded camera, a sharp knife, the body armour of black rubber, the “absurd flippers” and the “grave and awkward mask,” and goes under the water (which could here symbolise society) for a better exploration of the situation.

She descends from the schooner into a ladder leading deep into the sea, and then she describes her descent:

I go down
 my flippers cripple me
 I crawl like an insect down the ladder. (“Diving into the Wreck”)

The next stanza describes life under water. The air is blue and then bluer. Very soon it changes to the green of sea plants and weeds. However, the real purpose of the descent is not hidden. Though the speaker has to learn to turn and move with ease, without force despite the odds of the society around her, her real objective is to explore the wreck that has been done on womanhood and what can be done about it:

I came to explore the wreck
 the words are purposes

the words are maps
 I came to see the damage that was done,
 and the treasures that prevail. (Ibid.)

The speaker decides to probe into woman, to lay aside all the stories and formulations of patriarchy about woman and actually explore without bias the damage caused so far as well as the talents still laying latently unexplored and unexploited:

the thing I came for:
 the wreck not the story of the wreck
 the thing itself and not the myth.

And she makes an astonishing find:

the drowned face always staring
 towards the sun
 the evidence of damage
 worn by salt and sway into this thread bare beauty
 the ribs of disaster
 curving their assertion
 among the tentative hunters. (Ibid.)

What she finds is partly a treasure while partly a decadent corpse. The fact that the speaker does not distance herself from what she sees makes us know that the poem is not about another world. It is about her world and the falsities that people have believed about it:

This is the place
 And I am here the mermaid whose dark hair streams black, the merman in his armored body. (Ibid.)

She is therefore a part of it. However, being the explorer, she is detached. Her tools are appropriate – a knife to cut her way through and to cut through the obsolete and false beliefs hitherto adhered to about womanhood, a camera to record the facts and the book of myths itself, a symbol of the victimiser of women for this book is the *ipso facto* weapon which has

been used to keep women in psychological, emotional and intellectual imprisonment:

We are the half-destroyed instruments
 That once held to a cause
 the one who find our way
 back to this scene.
 carrying a knife, camera
 a book of myth
 in which our names
 do not appear.

This quest for the truth beyond the beliefs concerning men and women is presented though a sharp clear style and through metaphors which become their own myth. The whole inquiry into the truth about gender is metaphorically presented as a journey under water. Even the “book of myth,” the loaded camera and the knife are just metaphors pointing to the keenness with which women are going about the task of making the truth about themselves known, and of moving from the exterior to the centre. This is why the book of myths is one in which the names of women do not appear, though it is they who carry it. This shows that women have hitherto remained at the periphery.

Language becomes the object of representation and not just a means of communication. The speaker herself says, “the words are purposes / the words are maps.” The effectiveness of this lies in its ability in simultaneously concealing, disguising, alluding to and revealing truth. The truth, as Margaret Atwood puts it becomes “not just what you find when you open a door: it is itself a door, which the poet is always on the verge of going through” (Gelpi & Gelpi Albert: 1995 281).

The setting is the womb of a sea and the voices are those of mermaids and mermen. This setting poses a major difficulty to the speaker’s task. From her tools, we could say that her task is to see clearly, even if it means cutting through the mass of matter and to accurately record what has been seen. But seeing through water has always been tedious. Also, since water is always below the surface of the earth, this setting could be symbolic of the

subordinated position in which women find themselves in patriarchal societies. This subordination makes it difficult for them to see accurately and to record the rapes, the wars, the murders, and the various kinds of violations and mutilations that women pass through. The insinuation here is that they need a third eye – the camera – the eye of poetic vision and expression to help them see, understand and record. With the speaker's third eye and the clarity of vision thus produced, the result is a response of pain and anger: "I am she: ..."

whose drowned face sleeps with open eye
 whose breasts still bear the stress
 whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
 obscurely inside barrels
 half wedged and left to rot... ("Diving into the Wreck")

This anger is a visionary one pointing to the need and the desire to change the situation. This is why the drowned face's eyes are open and earlier on in the poem the "ribs of disaster / curve their assertion."

This poem can be compared to Ogundipe Leslie's "Letter to A Loved Comrade" (1985). In "Letter to A Loved Comrade," Ogundipe-Leslie works at demolishing the patriarchal prejudices which negate equality between men and women, such as men's prejudiced beliefs and myths about women's destructive nature. She presents the woman in her role of giver of life by treating the blood she sheds during labor as a symbol of her ultimate sacrifice for humanity. This presentation contrasts the perspective of patriarchy which views menstruation as a "demonic monthly river" that makes men afraid of women:

Always in you is the lurking fear of woman bringing
 things down... Not only with [your] demonic
 river of life, as they used to fear, but
 with [your] demonic hidden strengths couched
 in silences and fore knowledge... Her final
 correctness. And her constant, constant
 unswerving vote for life. ("Letter to a Loved Comrade")

The *persona* pits this mystique of motherhood against the man who generally seeks some kind of power within the confines of the home (over his wife), and seeks to deny her cry at her victimisation, calling it a show of emotions:

Now, you say, my brother, my friend; "There you
Go again Emotions ... Emotions...
Always Emotions shush... We, men, Have
repudiated anguish; "The revolution must be." (Ibid.)

However, the poet believes that the subjectivity and victimhood which women suffer transcend the home setting and span into the effects of the neo-colonial dictatorial leadership of African leaders who cause wars and cause families to live in shock, as family heads are killed at the war front. The anguish felt by women in the subordination to which roles of widowed wives and mothers place them is compared to the trauma of a head which is suddenly hacked from the body, the *persona* affirms that there ought to be a revolution to change things.

Describing this anguish, the *persona* questions her male counterpart in these words: "do you truly repudiate the anguish of the severed head, / sundered suddenly from the shocked body, the final / amazing flutter of the living eyes in that still living head." The *persona* believes that anyone, man or woman, who repudiates the pain of this kind of suffering, is either insincere or hypocritical:

... How sincere are you or
they who repudiate our anguish of living? Living and finely
living. Living on the Fine nerves of our knowing. How
sincere are you my comrade and how self deceiving?
("Letter to a Loved Comrade")

Womanhood in general and motherhood in particular become roles in which the woman struggles, but only gets mired in the primary soil of living. This image of the "hacked head" very aptly symbolizes suffering and victimization. It is more vividly portrayed in the last stanza: "How repudiate the ache we often feel, not expressible / in words, in dramatizing verbs and nar-

cissistic adjectives?" Victimhood here is a state in which even children suffer. But because the burden of bearing and raising children weighs on the woman, it is she who feels the pain of their suffering. Even as lovers, women are abandoned to themselves as they take life-changing decisions:

The nights of waiting for absent soldier-loves. The desperate self- quartering choices to be made. And un-made. to have or not to have a child at camp. To swell or not to swell with life on march...? (Ibid.)

The *persona*, in "Letter to a Loved Comrade," does not lose sight of the fact that this violence could be inflicted by women on women, which is then translated into the many and varying theories about women who either mask or repudiate their victimization and consequently pick quarrels with one another:

Shall we record the lancing anger of comrade against comrade? The war over concept and meaning, theory and method? Shall we say this war consumes the heart and enervates the soul? (Ibid.)

Life for the woman therefore degenerates into a vicious circle consisting of tensions and weariness:

Shall we say they do not exist? The passing weariness, born of tension and relax, the tension and relax which is the certain rhythm of life? (Ibid.)

In fact, the image of the woman presented here echoes Gwendolyn Brook's female *persona* in the poem "Weaponed Woman" (1945) in which the female *persona* is so encumbered with problems that she developed all kinds of "weapons" of resistance.

Ogundipe-Leslie's use of diction in phrases like, "heart rent by pain," "fiercely hacked," "our anguish of living," and "living on the fine nerves," is an effective linguistic technique that creates a mental picture of the victimhood represented insidiously by the situation of murder in which a head is viciously sundered from a shocked but living body. The fact that this idea is not only mentioned but vividly described in this manner gives this prose poem a great

appeal. The reader's anger is aroused and he is made to feel the same anguish of living described in the poem. In fact, as T.S. Eliot argues, this contemplation of "the horrid or sordid or disgusting by an artist is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse towards the pursuit of beauty" (Gilbert and Gubar 272).

The phonetic intensity of Ogundipe-Leslie's diction is overwhelming. The assonance produced by the successive repetition of the /i/ sound in "In our anguish of living, living and finely living: living on the fine nerves of our knowing," effectively mimics the shrill cry of a woman in pain. It is the cry of the pain felt at the anguish of living in patriarchy. Similarly, the harsh consonants in the /ck/, /d/, and /tt/ sounds of "hack," "sunder," and "flutter," create an effect which evokes not only violence but the pain felt at that violence. The poet's technique therefore affords an aesthetic experience in which the reader fuses with the work of art in an act of total perception. This act of "seeing" that the poet portrays is the ultimate source of the beauty of the poem — a beauty not from the situation described but from the way it is described.

Both poems are therefore concerned with explorations into the nature of women, be they wives or mothers, in order to lay bare the truth about women's oppression and silencing. Both poems are also similar in portraying that, in spite of the victimization to which women as mothers and wives are exposed, the poets believe in the woman's inherent strength and her natural endurance which make her stronger in the long run, than her male counterpart. In "Letter to a Loved Comrade," Ogundipe-Leslie states that the woman's "hidden strength is endurance, born of pain conquered, learnt from living with much life-bearing blood." And in "Diving into the Wreck," Rich states that the subordinated woman's "drowned face" is "always staring towards the sun . . . with its ribs of disaster, / curving their assertion." So, despite the fact that the women are subordinated, they are not destroyed; though they are wrecked, they are not crushed.

However, there are also some differences between the two poems. While Adrienne Rich prioritizes male oppression as the main force of women's subordination, Ogundipe-Leslie shows that the African woman's subjugation and victimization is different from that of her counterparts world-

wide, because African women are the victims not only of patriarchy, but of the neo-capitalist self-aggrandizing greed of post colonial African leaders, as well as the victims of imperialist greed. As the poet states,

How record as we must, the start to the first shot
Of the new guerrilla, the horror of red cascading human
Bowels from a real man after months of practice with sacks...Shall we
record the lancing anger of comrade against Comrade? The war over con-
cept and meaning, theory and method? Shall we say this war consumes the
heart and enervates the soul? ("Letter to a Loved comrade")

It is this greedy tendency that brings about wars and women on women violence.

In the above stanza, there is even a recognition of the fact that it is because of neo-colonialism that women remain disunited about "concept and meaning, theory and method" in feminist scholarship. The divergences between these poems and between the perspectives of difference and equality owe something to the differences in national cultures. In an attempt to answer the questions raised in the introduction, American women's poetry, represented here by the poems by Adrienne Rich, seems to have proposed a separate sphere for women as a solution to the sexual inequalities between women and men. This means a move from a sphere shared with men in which women are subjugated and victimised to a domain of female power. In the African world view, women seem to recognise through their poetry that both in the private as well as in the public spheres, they are dominated by men. To them therefore, a primary female difference has, in all areas of social life, been homologised to a male perspective which hides behind the mask of women's weakness in order to subordinate women. The remedy for this state of affairs cannot lie in the traditional conception of women's difference which functions on male terms and has been used to keep women in inferior positions. Rather, it lies in the exploration of another kind of women's difference which will eventually become the basis for women's liberty.

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