

Female Power in Richard Masagbor's *Labyrinths of a Beauty*

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Abstract

An examination of female power in African literature provides veritable inroads into the strength, resilience, and agency of women in a patriarchal society. Richard Masagbor's "Labyrinths of a Beauty" is a profound exploration of female power, identity in the context of societal expectations and the peculiar African space. The novel intricately weaves the lives of its female characters, showcasing their journeys through the labyrinthine challenges posed by a patriarchal society. This paper aims to analyze how Masagbor portrays female power through the characters' experiences, relationships, and transformations, ultimately arguing that the novel serves as a celebration of female strength and agency. It delves into how Richard Masagbor's *Labyrinths of a Beauty* depicts women as strong, resilient, and influential figures within and outside their immediate environments, challenging stereotypes and deeply entrenched traditional gender roles. By illuminating the complexities of female power, this work contributes to a broader understanding of gender dynamics and cultural identities within the African literary landscape.

Introduction

The African historical space is replete with the activities of women who have asserted themselves and broken down all social and spiritual barrier of their time. Explicit veritable examples abound of women who, even in predominantly traditional societies, asserted themselves and moved from obscurity to greatness. Historical examples include Queen Amanirenas who ruled the Kingdom of Kush from 40 B.C. to 10 B.C., in the Nubian region, Queen Nzinga Mbande, the ruler of the Mbundu people in what is now Angola, and the Dahomey Amazons - an all-female military regiment in the Kingdom of Dahomey, now present-day Benin republic. African literature, in its social commitment, thus presents a tapestry of women who are exposed to the oppressive patriarchal activities and, how they surreptitiously resist this status quo.

Traditionally, the experiences of marriage and motherhood dominate the lives and identity of women in Africa. This is not surprising when one considers the enormous 'weight of the structural, cultural and ideological processes' which bears upon these women (Gamble Sarah, 2001:V111). In her persuasive text, *Feminist Mothers* (1990), Tuula Gordon conveys that such is the heaviness of social pressure upon women that it would 'predispose anybody towards conformity'(35). The reference, here, is to black African women, whose liberation has been delayed compared to that of their white sisters. Despite the above-mentioned unrelenting pressure, however, women do rebel and create personal lives 'within the framework of possibilities and limitations set by structures and cultures' (Gordon, 1990:17). This striving beyond limitations, is what Gordon eloquently describes as women's 'desubordination' (18). It finds expression through organised 'collective action or acts of everyday rebellion, which may be individualistic and isolated, but nevertheless constitute a significant phenomenon'. In the

novel, *Labyrinths of a Beauty*, this 'essential female' does emerge. As opined by Helen Chukwuma (1989:2), and in this context, the 'timid, subservient, lack-lustre woman' is replaced by 'a full-rounder human being, rotational, individualistic and assertive, fighting for, claiming and keeping her own' (2). Hence, the epithet 'Labyrinths' aptly describes the different struggles through the female character as archetypal female who journeys 'towards a new dawn for women and for Africa' (James, 1990, p. 4).

The novels of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali and particularly, Richard Masagbor's *Labyrinths of a Beauty* offer alternative perspectives of female characterisation in synchronic African literature than that of the demure, obeisant wife and mother, and are received 'as a welcome diversion from the African canon' (Chukwuma,1989:2). Helen Chukwuma, in 'Positivism and the Female Crisis' ascertained that the Novels of Buchi Emecheta (1989) are preoccupied with the re-appropriated depiction of the African woman in literature. She opined that, 'the female character has emerged from her cocoon, basking free to a mixed reception of surprise and wonder' (1989, p. 2). In the same vein, Katherine Frank explains in 'Women without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa' (Jones, 1987, p. 15) that the novel in Africa, has assumed a 'radical' and 'militant' stance on issues of female characterisation. These novels overturns the literary characterisation of the African woman from a 'shadowy figure which hovers on the fringes of the plot, suckling infants, cooking' and 'plaiting' hair. In Contemporary African Literature and the politics of Gender (1994), Florence Stratton highlights the consuming 'weight of the structural, cultural and ideological processes' which bears upon women (35). This is also in consonance with the views of Gordon that there is a great concern with redefining the world on the basis of the location and experiences of women, noting their oppression and subordination' (37). Gordon's proposition prompts the reader to think about *Adotse* and other women in the novel, *Labyrinths of a Beauty* as possible initiators of a new world-view or as reconstructors of their own worlds. The women certainly endeavour to reconstruct their own lives even though they are often 'obliged to use the same ingredients' (35); but the redefinition of the world, as suggested, may well be a hypothetical ideal canvassing support from the feminist perspective alone.

In *Masagbor* text, he portrays the female character, *Adotse* as one that exhibits strength and reject the institutionalized structures of patriarchy that keep them subjugated. This is shown in her resolve to go in search of *Erua* in the forest originally reserved for only male initiates (34). However, his approach to creative female powers is not oversimplified but nuanced. This is because he also presents other women who irrespective of their weaknesses, managed to navigate the confines of patriarchal structures thus coming out better than they previously were. By doing so, he realistically highlights the complexities of women's identity and power in the African setting.

In actualising the power of women in the *Labyrinths of a Beauty*, the author manipulates the characterization of prominent women in the text. The author uses these female characters to recommend a power structure for African societies. The experiences of *Adotse*, *Nene*, and *Iyaka* are clearly illustrated as they confront the world hitherto held bound by the male folks and were thus destined to rewrite the course of history to their advantage. The activities in the text take place in a male dominated world, so there was the need to fight for the rights of place and fully centralize the place of women in the emerging society. In a story that sets out as a

love story of two young couple, the author invents, using prominent women figures, the origin and transmutation of a society as they propel a new destiny and reality. In the *Labyrinths of a Beauty*, Erua and Adotse's Community have been in the illusion of the nether world - a passage between the community and the other world. When the priestly group was captured by the other world, the entire community was in a state of anarchy. '.... There was panic in the enclave. It had never happened. Adotse went almost berserk for here as a young and promising love affair just nipped in the bud just when it was born. It was a state of mourning all over the enclave. There was scarcely any family untouched' (*labyrinths of a Beauty*, 21).

Everybody gave up hope of ever seeing any of these men again. They felt that all was lost and there was nobody willing to take up any action after that. In fact, the naming of Inyo's child further illustrates the feeling of the society about the missing priests. Inyo named her baby 'Agboadana' which means, 'the world or life is not more than this'. The name given to this child represents the philosophical position of the leaders of thought in the society. This thought represents an agreement with the status quo. They have all accepted their fate and decided to live life the way it presents itself to them. Despite the horrors the journey portends, she decided to go in search of her missing husband who was a member of the priestly group. This kind of action would have been anticipated from the priests who have lost members or from the families who the missing priest belongs to, but they all declaimed and folded their hands in acrimony. The author covertly implied that even the gods or ancestors seems to have submitted to her spiritual powers because it was only to her own passwords that the pathway became a reality.

...it was an enfeebled Adotse that finally got to the gate. She whispered the password but to no effect, it was the return password. Then she pulled herself together and in desperation shouted some mumble-jumbled. It was a plaintive cry. As if more in pity for the path of true love than for the properties of the word, something slid by and a cavern opened. She rushed through and found herself on the other side... (*labyrinths of a Beauty*, 23).

Adotse appeared to have been aided by providence in her search for the missing priests. The truth is that the author in transforming the power structure of womanhood in the society proves that the gods and the ancestors may actually be more with the woman than the revered priests that were captured. Even if we deny the influence of the supernatural in these events, we are still left with the puzzle of finding out how her incoherent expressions opened the gates that were enclosed by a special password. This reinvention and subsequent transformation of womanhood was actually occasioned by the benevolent spirits of the enclave. Here again, a woman has taken the task usually ascribed to great masculine characters in the society. The African woman presented here is no longer the docile, inactive, sluggish woman painted of old. We now have a woman who will go out of her comfort zone to confront the scene and unseen realities of life, even if she has to walk her path alone.

Furthermore, when Adotse got to the nether world, the author endowed her with leadership qualities and human wisdom to dominate the world of men and women. The moment they settled down in the new world, Adotse one day asked Erua thus; 'How my dear, did you

manage the trying times, bereft of a father and with me not around to share in your grief and dry your tears? ‘

This question appears very innocuous to the events in the text. Herein lays another attempt by the author to subsequently transform our perception and ideas about women in the political arrangement of the society. One would naturally expect Erua to be asked questions about the emotional trauma that she passed through in the absence of her fiancée. In this case it was Adotse who had to comfort and asked Erua about it. This question can only mean that it was because the author has created a woman in the person of Adotse who is more emotionally balanced than men and thus defies the general belief that women in Africa are emotionally weak. We must also note here that she presents herself as a person who would have helped Erua to assuage his fears and pains and not someone who would have amplified it. This is despite the fact that she was also affected by the trauma in the village. This extra strength given to the virtues of womanhood is seen in various instances in the text.

Furthermore, in the affairs of life one would naturally look at the woman as a species that is very weak. The author once again here shows that woman could be very strong and emotionally more rigid and solid than the male. The love affairs that developed among the two couples while Erua was at the nether world are another case in point. The author introduces the affairs thus;

‘two intersecting love triangles were developing. They were ominous for Erua and his fiancée. Just as Nene loved Erua with a passion so too did the master of the house desperately need Adotse. At the intersection of them all was Erua. How will he play out the game and keep his sanity?’ (29)

Nene who was the wife of Ita the owner of the house was in love with Erua while Ita the husband of Nene was in love with Adotse. The masterly way in which Adotse kept her faithfulness to her fiancée is instructive here. Using all intrigues and senses, Adotse was able to escape from the love proposals of Nene on several occasions because she represents that whose resolve is unshakable. This was unlike Erua who fell for it and this is singular action was a major turning point in the life of the two lovers. Under intense pressure from Nene, who was also the master of the house. ‘Ita; listen to me, my dear little one’...ever since you came to my house things have not been the same. You have changed my world. Don’t you see how much I love you? I need you. Did Erua not give you my message..... Adotse kept the struggle on till she was able to coyly shy away from him (31 - 32).

When she was further sexually harassed by her host on more occasions, she carefully explained to Ita her situation and love affairs with Adotse which was already in place before the capture by the nether world. She explains; ‘Before we suffered calamity of captivity, we were already betrothed. When I did not see him I came in search of him. We found ourselves once again and vowed we would never be separated again. This is the story of our Love’ (39)

At this explanation, the man retreated. But the case of Erua was different, though he often resisted the love advance of Nene; he fell at the end like a pack of cards. On several occasions, he acceded to the love advances of Nene right under her husband’s nose. This very act by the two characters here is the presentation of the African woman in the spirit of fidelity

and steadfastness. While the man easily got caught in the love trap of the host's wife, Adotse remained faithful and steadfast in her belief in the sanity of their affairs. The author carefully describes the love scenes of Erua and Nene to show that he was fickle minded and unmindful unlike the woman who stood the true test of life by refusing the host. Adotse later bluntly confronted Erua with this fact:

'I mean that your hands were very clean... when I told you of the ways I rebuffed Ita's unwholesome advances, while you cashed in on his Eviela exits to give the wife a child – an infidelity that led to his death, you cleaned your hands for forceps of delivery while bearing with them shovels of entombment' (95).

The author carefully describe the love scenes of Erua and Nene to shoe that he was fickle minded and unmindful unlike the woman who stood the true test of life by refusing the host. It is also instructive to note that it was this love affair that finally led to the untimely death of Erua when he transgressed the law of brotherhood by eating in the house of the man whose wife he defied. 'Pardon me Nene", he said, "If I say the pleasant memories of our past deeds are only harbingers of sorrows, remorse, guilt for what we innocently caused. I was reminded that those fine times of ours had contributed to Ita's death". She sighed, than exclaimed. "Who is feeding you with this superstition?" (*LOB* 96,).

These are instances to show recreate our image of the African woman who should be seen as solid faithful and rigid in her belief and stance for all that is noble and true in life. The woman that is hitherto seen as weak and lacks the capacity to initiate new things and stance has been reinvented to present a picture of women that are not only leaders but enforcers of opinions. While they were still in captivity, all the captured people suffered the humiliation of being second class citizens in the land. Though they would have wanted to go home, none of them could have the courage and will power to do it or even suggest it. On a particular day, Adotse was beaten up even when she was pregnant. She resolved that she and her people must make a deliberate effort to leave the land of captivity. Strange as the idea appears then, she convinced all that she would find the way if they make the effort. It is instructive to note that she was the only one who had this strong belief that they will find their way home. ... 'Erua, my darling, ... We must leave. We must look for the exit. I have a premonition that we shall find it.' (41)

They went to search for it and though they could not find it the first day. It was Adotse who was also told in her sleep where to find the exit. The fact remains here that, yet again the spirit of the land has again decided to relate with Adotse rather than the men or the priests among them. This would is invented to understand intuition and premonitions more than the men. In a typical African society, these women were seen as distraction from the activities of the gods and spirits, but here, they are the one who are in tune with the elements of the land. Adotse literarily went to the nether land of captivity, saw the people and rescued them all. Little wonder that the community looks at her as a superhuman being. 'What you done for us and the women folk will be remembered by generations yet unborn. You are a woman that is beyond manhood. You have saved a whole race. We were all dead but you have brought hope and life back. See how the whole town has been seemingly electrified.'(48)

This is the image of a new woman that the author has invented out of the docile woman that existed before now. This is the image reinvented from the shadows of patriarchy that existed in most African societies. It is a veritable transformation of the African woman who would dare to take the prime place in the society. Her singular acts and action has turned the society into a happy world. Women who in most cases were presented as accounting for the problems of the society have now been transformed into women who are sources of solution to the problems created by the male folks in the society. 'The community looked at Adotse as a super human specially created with that redemptive mission even though it was by accident. She went, found the way, and brought home the lost brothers. She unraveled the age-old mystery and in so doing carved an indelible niche for herself.' (62)

In the text, we also note the roles of Iyaka and Izenubu in their effort to make men understand the evil of oppressing women in the society. The women led by Izenubu, Adotse and Iyaka were able to make the men do their wish by not cooking for them at first and secondly by denying the men sex. Despite all that the men did, the women, led by Iyaka and her group carried the struggle to a good conclusion. The women were able to manipulate conjugal intimacy to their advantage. In doing this, they succinctly ask us the question of who is more resistant to sexual depravation between the male and the female. The answer is provided by the later events in the text. 'Iyaka and Izenubu moved from house to house counseling or rather inciting housewives. They would stop at the gate and call the woman of the house... fellow woman you must keep your legs closed together for a week. Do not succumb to any cajolement or sweet-tongued promises or even gifts.' (81)

These were no mean feat as one of the women was nearly beaten to death on more than one occasion. They successfully did this and the life of Adotse was preserved. This is the new image of womanhood that was created. The textual characterization of women that can positively reengineer the society for the good of all is the end product of the transformation occasioned by the actions of the women. They forced the society to realize the present realities and adjust to them. The myth of the nether land was broken because through Adotse who went into the land of beyond and was able to come back and revealed the myth which had been spread through thousands of generations. It was now known to them that nothing of such existed and that the nether world was just a community of people like theirs, and as such, her life was eventually threatened by the agents of the priests who had been misleading and feeding fat from the whole members of the community (77-79). They bounded her hands and feet and meant to kill her" (84). Even on this occasion, they were also rescued by the general resolve of the men and the women in the community have decided to be part of the change that the society was witnessing in the advent of the return of Adotse. The society was thus mobilized to counter the actions of the priestly group.

The *Labyrinths of a Beauty* thus represents an array of women from all social classes; strong-willed and assertive women such as Adotse in *Labyrinths of a Beauty*, and women in traditional roles as mothers and un-empowered, uneducated housewives. There are those who irrespective of being illiterate completely reverse gendered roles and distinctions thereby expressing their sense of autonomy such as Nene in *Labyrinths of a Beauty*.

The preceding experience of Adotse sets the background for her quest for transformation. Adotse had made a pact with herself. She would have a completely new

beginning in her community. Since she had left land of captivity back to her community, she had two humiliating and shameful experiences. She would now break with the past and make something of herself in her community. As an evidence of her cleansed spirit, she resolved that she would not again obey the power of her body over men; that any involvement was out until she had defeated the past through a new flowering of self (106 -107).

The author succeeded in reinventing womanhood in the language of modernity. In the death of Ita, the masterly way the women engaged themselves in the activities is another case where the reinvention has been successful. The women are not seen as stools or tools of the men but as equal partners in the progress of the society. Just as Ita paid the price for the infidelity of the wife, Erua also paid the price of breaking the law of brotherhood by his association with the household of Ita. Men here are the victims of their sexual laxities. Instead of the docile African woman, we see women who are ready to reinvent the society and contribute meaningfully even if they have to struggle with men. In their world of struggle, they eliminated any act/s that would have brought problems to them. When they were to have leadership tussle, as it often common with women, they came together to quietly and quickly resolve the issue; ... That evening, Iyaka and her assistant group leader came to see Adotse. They reminded her that even though they led the other women in town in their silent struggle against their men folk, she, Adotse was the de facto leader. Her return from the world of the dead had cut a niche for her in the annals of the people. All we tried to do was to let them know that our empowerment was not from here.' (87)

Women have been reinvented to present a very resourceful group who could hold their own without any interference. The author has shown that these women are very coordinated and purpose driven at all times. They strategized and confronted the men with facts, reasons and well –thought out ideas. They were ready to change old practices that were against the woman and thus redirect the course of posterity forever. Izenudu remarks; ‘...remember that our ritualistic custodian daughter is right now down in pains. I heard him complain of the practice. Now is the time to kill the practice. We have beautiful ideas that will revolutionize the society...we must prepare our arguments and make it quite convincing.’ (89).

The noble role played by Nene during the burial of Ita is also very important in the reinvention and transformation of women in the text. She only went to visit or just pay the last respect to her former husband. But when she was told that the task of laying the man to rest would depend on her participation in the burial rites, all expected her to refuse because she was no longer legally married to Ita. She went out of her way to do this and it was well appreciated by the people. In respect, but greatly inconvenient to herself, she took on the task: ‘My people here gathered ... I did not leave home prepared for this. I did not in my wildest dreams think of it but since it is the wish of the beloved dead, I succumb; I would do anything to smoothen his path for him. (116)

This act of hers surprised the people because the job required was no mean feat. We see another instance in the transformation of woman. The author shows that Nene, like most women in the text, has a noble character that would always want the good of the community. The resources offered by the women went a great deal in the realization of the goals of the society they lived in. Nene carried out the duty without missing out any house, and she did it smartly

with 'nibble feet'. Women were hitherto presented as clumsy and slow but the author corrected or transformed women beyond the societal expectations.

Conclusion

In patriarchal society that *Labyrinths of a Beauty* is written, the people think that women are the sole properties of men, but in the story, we can see *Adotse* breaking this popular misconception. *Adotse* has strong stand that they can break the barriers set by men. She feels they have got control over their faculties. *Adotse* has become revolutionary minded woman with strong determination to fight against imperialism, the system that introduced misery and suffering into the peaceful people of Nigeria generally, and women in particular. Masagbor's female protagonist, *Adotse* attains ingenious transformation by becoming increasingly resourceful as the novel progresses. The convincing creation of this protagonist's regenerated woman attests to Masagbor's understanding of the predicament of females in a post-independent state. In no way does Masagbor shy away from tackling recent challenges facing women whose innocence has been abused and who in different ways overcome the crisis of a husband's treachery sleeping with a married woman in the land of captivity as well as sexual exploitation and harassment in the world. *Adotse* succeeds in taking a strong stand in combating general social ills by acting for the good of her people; she courageously endeavors to eradicate what she perceives as the root of her own personal and societal ills.

The author succeeded in reinventing womanhood in the language of modernity. in the death of ita, the masterly way the women engaged themselves in the activities is another case where the reinvention has been successful. The women are not seen as stools or tools of the men but as equal partners in the progress of the society. Just as Ita paid the price for the infidelity of the wife, Erua also paid the price of breaking the law of brotherhood by his association with the household of Ita.

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