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Lekan Balogun, Victoria University of Wellington

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“Ele Supremacy”: Obinrin-Aesthetic in Bosede Ademilua-Afolayan’s *Once Upon an Elephant*¹

Lekan Balogun
Victoria University of Wellington
New Zealand.

Abstract²

Yoruba cultural understanding about *obinrin* (woman) elaborates on her role as the second half of the pillar upon which society is firmly placed. Unlike Western feminism, which insists that women are marginalized, Yoruba culture rather defines the individuals’ roles within the context of a stable and virile society, in which *okunrin* (male) and *obinrin* (woman/female) play their collaborative and active parts. While most female Nigerian contemporary writers, who are influenced by the same Western ideology of divide, have vigorously pursued the notion of female oppression and cited patriarchy as one of its oppressive tools, Bosede Ademilua-Afolayan toes a different line by providing a clearly-defined alternative perception. Unlike the Nietzschean concept of woman as God’s second mistake, in *Once Upon an Elephant* (2015), she rather engages womanhood from the perspectives of daughters, wives and mothers, and collectively as a rallying point for society’s survival. In contrast to Beauvoirean existentialist feminism, and through the analysis of how her text engages the different spheres of womanhood from the Yoruba perspective, the paper argues that Ademilua-Afolayan’s play is particularly a useful and ennobling exercise in the discourse of this “special” breed of human species.

Keywords: adaptation; culture; existentialism; feminism; *obinrin*; perception; reality.

¹ Among indigenous Yoruba, *Ele* refers to the female genitalia. But the word has come to represent the female gender in everyday language.
Introduction

[...]

_A difa fun won n’Idi-kunrin_  
_Aba fun won n’Idi-binrin_  
_Igba Idi di meji_  
_N’ire omo de_

So declared Ifa oracle to dwellers in the city of men  
And dwellers in the city of women  
Men have their ends  
Just as women have their ends  
*But when the two ends meet*  
*Conception results* (qtd in Emmanuel,130; emphasis added).

Through its focus on female marginalization, feminism attacks anything, group or institution, that it perceives to be against female freedom. Unfortunately, in “destroying” a perceived social malaise, it also jettisons time-hallowed traditions, which society could benefit from, much like throwing the baby away with the bath water. While my intention in this paper is not to dabble into such a debate, it is necessary to do so as a background to my discussion of gender value that _Ele_ symbolizes. It is also important to broach the subject in order to address how, engaging the female species in the light of feminism, might not also allow for understanding the levels of signification that _Ele_ represents among the Yoruba. This is because, contrary to Western philosophy and ideological perception, Yoruba culture recognizes and, indeed, places _Obinrin_ (woman) on a very high pedestal. Hence, it is hard not to agree with Adogame that “gender inequalities are partly attributable to Western influences, particularly deriving from colonial policies [with] patriarchal orientations” (143).

Although there have been significant efforts by a number of African/Nigerian scholars to redefine sweeping Western-influenced feminist ideologies within the borders of an inclusive realm of African cultural reality, this paper argues that Yoruba notion may offer a better and more enduring explanation. In 1994, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie argued for STIWANISM, her acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa, an ideology which reinforces the complementarity of the two genders; a year later, Catherine Acholonu suggested MOTHERISM, and labelled it “an Afrocentric alternative to feminism”; in the same year, Obioma Nnaemeka placed on the table, NEGO-FEMINISM,
in other word, “negotiated feminism and no ego feminism,” and quite recently, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo added “Snail-sense feminism”.³

However, in spite of their brilliant approaches and efforts at reorientation about the female specie and psyche, a close scrutiny of these feminist and/or womanist approaches shows that they are at best diverse reiteration of some aspects of Yoruba cultural notion about the male/female relationship. Ososfisan once observed that “most knowledge about the environment [and about ourselves] that we moderns are just “discovering” have been written long ago, encapsulated in nuggets of mythical wisdom” (n.pg). The “nugget of mythical wisdom” that he identifies includes Yoruba perception about obinrin (woman) and the layers of signification attached to her type in their society. But, we may well ask: in what specific context? Perhaps in order to answer the question and prove how Bosede Ademilua-Afolayan has used her play, Once Upon an Elephant, to articulate this cultural reality, let us examine feminism, and especially existential feminism, as proposed by Simone de Beauvoir.

Feminism: What has Simone de Beauvoir to do with this?

My question about Beauvoir is a deliberate one. Of all feminist philosophers of the twentieth century, the French existentialist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir stands out. Her ground-breaking work, The Second Sex, in which she declares that “one is not born a woman but becomes one,” is something of a “holy scripture” in the field of feminist existentialism and feminist theory. According to Beauvoir, woman “finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other” (29). She insists that “all the main features of her training combine to bar her from the roads of revolt and adventure”; and she “cheerfully believes the lies because they invite her to follow the easy slope” that only “spells frustration and oppression” (730,29). She concludes that “it was neither a changeless essence nor a mistaken choice that doomed her to immanence, to inferiority. They were imposed upon her” (726; emphasis added).

It is logical that Beauvoir would be our starting point. In fact, she is the perfect case study to examine feminist misrepresentation of the female figure, and how Yoruba value can help to “rescue her” from her type. However important as it may appear, Beauvoir’s influence on contemporary feminist ideology is secondary, the influence existentialism exerts on her works being everything. This position can be understood given that existentialism is a philosophical movement which stresses the “existential attitude,” fuelled by the assertion that human beings’ suffer from a sense of disorientation due to the perceived meaninglessness and/or absurdity of the world (Solomon,1-2).

Existentialism’s central argument is that existence precedes essence. Not to mention also its radical reaction to the style and content of traditional philosophy, which it regards as abstract, if not

³ While Buchi Emecheta was mild in her reaction to feminism, calling herself a “feminist” with a small “f”, Ama Ata Aidoo rather ranted “Feminism. You know how we feel about that embarrassing Western philosophy? The destroyer of homes…imported mainly from America to ruin nice African homes”.

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obscure, and removed from concrete human experience (Breisach,5; Kaufman,12). Existentialism is thus predicated on the fact that human beings both create values and give meaning to their life. But its contradiction can quickly be glimpsed from the apparent difficulty in finding a suitable definition for the philosophical movement, and the inconsistencies in the teachings of its proponents, especially its leading figure, Jean-Paul Sartre.

Sartre’s indecisiveness and initial refusal to accept being labelled an existentialist by the French Catholic philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, only to turn around and embrace the tag wholeheartedly within the same year, may also explain a lot about the philosophical movement nurtured, as it were, from a standpoint of dissociation from organized religion, since existentialism is “the attempt to draw all consequences from the position of atheism” (Woods, vii). Sartre’s initial reaction remains a part of his philosophy that is marked by contradictions. But, it is his influence and romantic relationship with Beauvoir that interest us here. Asked whether there is any influence on her work, Beauvoir does not hesitate to declare “the only important influence on The Second Sex was Being and Nothingness by Jean Paul-Sartre” (Simons,204). She also confesses to “worshipping” Sartre in a very unusual way as “my little absolute” (DeMarco,2004).4 A number of commentators have reinterpreted this statement in many ways: Marks notes that “what Simone de Beauvoir is saying is in fact that God is dead; long live Sartre”(30), while Moi believes that Sartre was God for de Beauvoir (224).

There is also an equal need to examine Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism in relation to Sartre’s influence in the formation and development of her ideas. For instance, while in Being and Nothingness, Sartre uses the terms “being-in-itself” (brute matter) and “being-for-itself” (consciousness) to articulate his philosophical categorisation, Beauvoir substitutes same with “immanence” and “transcendence”. As she explains “every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence into the ‘en-soi’ [being-in-itself] the brutish life of subjection to given conditions, and of liberty unto constraint and contingency”. Beauvoir claims that her perspective follows those of “Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty,” especially because “our perspective is that of existentialist ethics” the philosophical idea, which considers the body as “a limiting factor” (66).

Furthermore, considering Sartre’s existentialist philosophy’s emphasis on gender-neutral existents, and Beauvoir’s affirmation of his influence on her work, Penelope Deutscher’s argument that the deference to Sartre’s philosophical authority amounts to Beauvoir’s lack of intellectual autonomy is instructive. This assertion is both illuminating and useful to an understanding which Moira Gatens also sheds light on, although from a different context, in terms of identifying the inadequacies of existentialism as a human or social theory, rather than male or individual being’s analyses (50-1).

Consequently, Beauvoir’s reliance on Sartre’s existentialist philosophy to develop her own feminist ideology and its implication for reading meanings into gender and/female reality, needs to be scrutinized in relation to Yoruba philosophical thought. This is especially true of her work which supposedly challenges stereotyping of the female species as weak and subordinate to the male, but also seriously contradicts itself at the same time by applying the same parameter it condemns. This becomes necessary due to the irreconcilable argument contained in The Second Sex. In the chapter entitled: “The Data of Biology” Beauvoir writes;

Woman is weaker than man, she has less muscular strength, fewer red blood corpuscles, less lung capacity, she runs more slowly, can lift less heavy weights, can compete with man in hardly any sport; she cannot stand up to him in a fight. To all this weakness must be added the instability, the lack of control, and the fragility already discussed: these are facts (66).

Beauvoir goes on to articulate other “weaknesses” suffered by women, including painful childbirth, breastfeeding that stimulates a wide range of diseases such as fever and soreness, not to mention how it drains the woman of vitality. She particularly stresses how puberty is responsible for making women eternally weak as compared to men, who are not bugged down by such biological physicality. Another important point that she stresses is how she perceives menstruation;

Menstruation is painful: headaches, over-fatigue, abdominal pains, make normal activities distressing or impossible; psychic difficulties often appear; nervous and irritable, a woman may be temporarily in a state of semi-lunacy; the control of the nerve centres over the peripheral and sympathetic systems is no longer assured (353).

Critics have argued that assuming The Second Sex challenges the construction of woman as the “Other” by using feminine embodiment as the basis for such gender classification, invoking the same features to stress her limitation creates contradictory tension. In other words, what Beauvoir (and by extension feminists influenced by her works) has succeeded in proving is that “to feminist existentialism, women are not free, but are also always free” (Deutscher,298). But, Deutscher is not the only feminist critic who sees Beauvoir’s work in this light. The same notion is expressed by Celine Leon. She maintains that “the French existentialist does not speak with a single voice. Either she wishes to have it both ways, or she takes with one hand that which she gives with the other (Leon, 152); and Elshtain quips that “De Beauvoir launches volleys against her subjects in the name of liberating them” (307).

Some other feminist critics have traced the inconsistencies and contradictions in Beauvoir’s perception about women to Sartre, whose philosophy is an open expression of bias against women. They argue that her feminist posture is suffused with “a philosophical baggage loaded with sex bias” (Deutscher,172). In Toril Moi’s opinion, it is in the very passages where Beauvoir unconsciously seeks to pay tribute to Sartre “that she betrays his philosophy” (Moi,164). According to Gatens, what Beauvoir shares with Sartre, is the fact that “the female body and femininity quite simply are absolutely Other to
the human subject, irrespective of the sex of that subject” (58; emphasis in the original). Gatens considers Sartrean existentialist philosophy as a movement with its own culture of devaluation. She argues that by standing on Sartrean existentialist philosophical pedestal in order to push her own feminist position, Beauvoir inadvertently “entertains a philosophical dualism of the most orthodox kind that predisposes [her] work towards locating the source of women’s inferior status in female biology” (2). She concludes that while Beauvoir’s posture appears to be that of liberating the female species from patriarchal culture, adopting Sartrean existentialism ends up making her to “fail to take note of the fact that the value-laden character of any particular theory is implicitly to perpetuate the values that have been constructed by a culture that devalues women and those aspects of life with which they have been especially associated” (Gatens, 3).

Conversely, Yoruba culture negates Sartrean philosophical standpoints in several ways. While Sartre advocates atheism, the Yoruba express a very strong religious sense that is located, as it were, within a spiritual dual and tripartite cosmology. The Yoruba cosmogony is governed by a religious consciousness of “the cultic and the festive, the sacred and the profane”. It is a world of religious belief and mythology, underneath which is “a belief in the indeterminate, many-faceted nature of truth and its expression as a variety of emanation from a single irreducible essence” (Wright, 23, 7). Even if they are not seen, there are forces the Yoruba believe to be part and parcel of their own existential reality. They recognize the ultimate Essence, the Supreme Being, Olodumare under whose pre-eminence is placed a pantheon of Orisa and below which are human beings who interact freely with the divine. The Orisa pantheon also provides an example of how the male and female comradeship allows for continuity of existence through its composition that is made up of male and female deities, each with its own recognized symbol, attributes and assigned duties, the example of which is also expressed in the human/spirit relationship at the mundane level of perception.

Whereas Sartre’s existentialism is especially predicated on the notion of “existence precedes essence” Yoruba notions stress essence through its myth and ritual observances. Soyinka describes this cultural reality variously as “one seamless existence,” the “integrated essentiality” or the “animist interfusion of all matter and consciousness” (51, 145). Yoruba myth of creation exemplifies much of what Soyinka attempts to explain. Similarly, George Thomson comes close to describing the Yoruba perception of essence when he writes that “myth was created out of ritual. The latter term must be understood in a wide sense […] Every action—eating, drinking, tilling, fighting—has its proper procedure, which being prescribed, is holy” (Thomson, 63-4). Ogun’s rite in Yoruba land, usually perform for renewal of life, provides an ample explanation for this last point; while the men leap up in manic and warlike charges brandishing the staff of Ogun, made up here of long pole covered in lump of ore bound in palm frond (Ogun’s symbolic apparel), the women “dilute” the aggressive ore with sonorous songs, rendered with soothing voices. At the end, both aggression and compassion are fused
in the symbolism of the interaction between the male and female bodies during the rite for the society’s regeneration after decay.

Furthermore, while Beauvoirean feminism articulates shortcomings about women as earlier cited, Yoruba culture strongly emphasizes a departure by placing women on a pedestal of awe and dignity. It is even interesting that, in spite of Beauvoir’s influence on so many European (and African) feminist scholars, the Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst, Julie Kristeva stands out. She demonstrates an awareness that is close to the Yoruba perception of the female specie. Her description of the woman is interesting

[The] free-floating sea of the womb and the enveloping seriousness of the mother’s breast... Woman is silence of the unconscious... unrepressed and unrepressive flow of liberating energy (qtd in Selden, 144; emphasis added).

In ritual terms, Kristeva’s “silence of the unconscious” corresponds to the superior mystic knowledge possessed by the iyäami (the Great Mothers), amply expressed in the Gelede cult in Yoruba belief, while her “flow of liberating energy” exemplifies the sonic waves of the Gelede-mother-speaking-drum, in all its overwhelming totality of expressive power (Ibitokun, 120). The Gelede represents female power among the Yoruba on the one hand, and, on the other, it represents a larger framework of Yoruba dialectics of existence. Also, Gelede’s central emphasis, being the placation of Mother Nature (Iya Nla), is an essential attribute shared with the Ogboni, another Yoruba cult which focuses on women, in terms of the tremendous judicial, political and religious power they wield among the Yoruba during the precolonial era and now (Henry and Margaret Drewal, 1983; Lawal, 1996).

Again, Kristeva’s insight may also be compared to the “hot”/“cold” characteristic of some of the orisa. For instance, while Ogun (a male deity) belongs to the former, Osun (a female deity) belongs to the latter. Besides, Osun’s symbolism and identification with the crown (an object of dual identity) of male obas in Yoruba land, also stresses this concept in some other ways. In a much more embracing capacity incorporating both the spiritual and physical embodiment, however, the Yoruba practice of regency (usually a woman assumes the role of a king, either during crisis or interregna) shows the balance of power in society: while men operate in the political domain, women take charge in the ritual/spiritual aspect and the two are merged as long as she saddles the throne.

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5 It is interesting that Julie Kristeva is the founder and head of the committee for the Simon de Beauvoir Prize, dedicated to honouring the efforts of individuals and groups committed to fighting for gender equality, and the challenge of structures and/or acts violating human rights; how ironic!

6 Benedict Ibitokun considers Kristeva’s theory (influenced by Jacques Lacan’s “the imaginary” and “the symbolic”) and the Yoruba Gelede cult as the same female assertion of will, and “impulse”. By “impulse” he meant the form, the ideal, the phallic, the phallocentric; and the “symbolic” as the concept of sex or gender difference (136).

7 In regency, the daughter of the deceased king usually assumes office, as an interim/transitional phase pending the ascension of another king. During that period, her signification is profound, detailing her connection between the female procreative abilities and the sanctity of life, and the judicial power inherent in her “person” as the Great Mother, part of which the Ogboni celebrates. It shows Yoruba political structures being anchored on mystical principles.
Similarly, in her engagement with the importance of gender balance from the historical, phenomenological and ethnographic perspectives which detail the holistic paradigm of the Yoruba worldview, Oyeronke Olajubu highlights this “meaning” and “meaningfulness” nature of the Orisa pantheon composition and the above-named Yoruba cults to understanding gender construct among the Yoruba. She regards the orisa characteristic as principles. According to Olajubu, “hot” and “cold” also translates as “lile/toughness” and “ero/coolness”. Although this cultural make-up is also expressed in social relationship, it does not however translate to the notions of oppression and domination of one gender by the other. On the contrary, the relationship exemplifies difference, which is mediated by the philosophy of complementary gender relations (Olajubu, 9).

From the foregoing, and, as Beauvoir also expresses in one of her moments of contradictory seizures, “woman is the victim of no mysterious fatality; the peculiarities that identify her as a woman get their importance from the significance placed upon them. They can be surmounted, in the future, when they are regarded in new perspectives” (Beauvoir,736; emphasis added), Yoruba cultural position on gender may yet function as the much-needed new perspective in this regard.

**Otun we Osi, osi we otun: Gender Concept in Yoruba land.**

The epigraph to this discussion, the Ifa verse, is useful to begin the discussion in the remaining sections of this paper. In that short passage quoted from a lengthy rendition, our attention is drawn to the very basis of Yoruba conception of the complementary relationship that orders its universe. This is in terms of the male and female elements, which ensure continuity of life. The male and female “ends” refers to the waistline region, specifically, the male and female genitalia. Essentially, what the Ifa verse describes in the quatrain is the process of sexual intercourse, conception and the birth of a child. The emphasis is on lines 2-3, where “idi” is mentioned and translated as “ends,” which has a sharp contrast to its Western interpretation. The Merriam-Webster Online English dictionary defines “end” as “a point that marks the limit of something; the part at which something no longer continues to happen or exist”; “cessation of a course of action, or activity”; “something incomplete, death or destruction”; whereas the Yoruba scholar, Abosede Emanuel, translates it otherwise.9

Needless to say that the choice of word is deliberate. Rather than deploy biological symbols of the male and female genitalia to express the resultant act of conception that occurs when both “idi” meet, Emanuel appropriately uses “ends,” which perfectly corresponds to the intended Ifa spiritual meaning. Aside from emphasizing the difference in Yoruba thought and the conceptualization of experience in comparison to Western values, the choice of words also shows the logical ordering of the

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8 If the right hand washes the left, and the left hand washes the right, then will both hands be clean—Yoruba proverb.
world, through a supposedly illogical order of occurrence. By this I mean that, while the English dictionary explains “end” as limit, cessation and/or even death, in Yoruba thought, it is the beginning of life and by extension, the assurance of the continuity of human existence.

Such a profound metaphysical interpretation also leads us to Beauvoir’s description of the woman’s menstruation which she insists is nothing but the most painful and “disastrous” individual experience that the female gender often goes through. Whereas menstruation is all about pain in existential feminism, in Yoruba belief, the menstrual flow is not just a powerful carrier of potential life, the regenerative ability of menstruation makes it an essential element of the process which “represents the complete cycle of death and creation, in which dissolution and decay are accompanied by fertility” (Wright, 15). As the flow prepares the round for new life, it also constitutes the major criteria symbolic/metaphysical criteria, which qualifies the female to perform other crucial ritual functions—as medium of ancestorhood—especially when life on earth has ceased. That is, in terms of a striking the accord that assures the continued interactive relationship between all the levels of existence, which Soyinka conceptualizes in “The Fourth Stage” as the world of the living, the world of the dead, and the world of the unborn.  

This important woman’s role in the ritual of attaining ancestorhood in some Yoruba society also stresses the female gender’s significance to conception, flourishing of existence and the continuity of same in death. Among the Ijesa-Yoruba, the female children observe the rite called “Kike erin wo” or “Orin omolayole,” at the death of a male elder. According to Ayo Opefeyitimi, the significations of the former, which translates as “The song of the elephant has fallen,” is to show maleness as strong, as much as it connotes royalty, power and majesty depending on the status of the deceased; while the latter, “Don’t jubilate over children until they succeed you,” stresses the significance of succession and the continuous cycle of life and existence, which is a process that Yoruba believe death cannot truncate.

Although the “Kike erin wo” rite is not unconnected to the immense spiritual power women are believed to possess, and which the Yoruba mind understands, essentially, the parable and/or cultural value of the rite is located in both its socio-political and metaphysical significations. This is because in order to balance the inequality between the male who ascends jural authority and inherits most of wealth of the father at the socio-political level, the eldest daughter who is not socialised into the wealth by convention and law, performs the most important rite of transition. This is more so if we proceed with the Yoruba belief that the spiritual world controls the physical, and its expression through reverence for their ancestors and pantheon of deities.

Besides, in accordance with Yoruba thought of the metaphysical level, the female who is an agent of regeneration through her menstrual flow and “power” of childbirth, occupies the threshold of

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10 See; “The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy”:130-60.
physical and spiritual existence. It is therefore logical that, as the secret passage of coming into existence, the woman can as well function as the passage of ascension and consecration into ancestorhood after descending into the abyss through death. The cyclical relationship that Soyinka articulates is thus made possible through the woman, as the secret passage-way of coming and returning, leaving and arrival/returning, whichever way it is perceived (Opefeyitimi, 4-11). Having said that, let us now turn attention to how the Yoruba culture presents Obinrin/woman at the levels of daughter, wife and mother respectively.

**Iya Moopo: Many Layers, One Body**

*Iya Moopo* is the symbol of womanhood, the Yoruba goddess that protects women’s interest. It is usually artistically represented by an ancient sacred bronze casting called *edan.*\(^{11}\) The *edan* is often portrayed holding one child that clings to the breast upright, with another one strapped to her back, her/his dead facing downward and feet pointing upward. In Yoruba cosmology, this image represents the ancient trinity of the female. Thus, constructed in that image is the three levels, or categorization of womanhood among the Yoruba; as daughters, wives and ancient mothers, the last being the group, which possesses esoteric knowledge and secrets of the world at the same time (Olademo, 71).

However, individual identity in the society, especially of the woman, is predicated on family and lineage membership of both an *Ile* and *Idile*. While *ile* translates as “house” which details the sharing of the same lineage, origin and/or common ancestry, *idile* covers extended family. The first criteria of membership of the *ile* for daughters, like sons, is to be born into that compound. They continue to enjoy this privilege as long as they live, even when they marry and move out of the house. Although there are instances such as divorce/or dispute in matrimony when a woman returns to her parents, but this is often very strictly frowned at (such a situation is called *ilemosu/dalemosu*);\(^{12}\) whereas in another instance her return is necessitated by customs, in which she comes back to assume an office sanctioned by tradition. In this case, the *ile* becomes a source of privilege because of natal rights. Above all, basic to her role is obedience to her parents, and upholding the sacred duty to lead a dignifying way of life that will not bring shame on her family and society.

Transiting from daughter to wife comes with its own social and religious responsibilities. First, she goes into her matrimony with her personal *orisa* (deity) and those of her family/lineage, where a space is provided for her to propitiate such deities as, and when necessary. As a result, her ritual duties are not severed by marriage, but strengthened as she has to observe those of her husband and his lineage as well. This proceeds from the Yoruba notion that marriage is not just about a man/woman being married to another, but to the family, and/or even the coming together of two families as the case may be. This is why practices such as adoption is encouraged for a woman who remains barren, and

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\(^{11}\) *Edan* is an important *Oghoni* cult symbol.

\(^{12}\) The practice is “*ilemosu*” while the act is “*dalemosu*”.
leviration for a woman whose husband dies, and in which case she is remarried to another male member of the family. Except that, in this specific situation, she has a right to decline. This cultural background prepares her for a more tasking role in future as the case maybe. But, as wife who begins to procreate, another important dimension is added to her personality. She assumes the role of mother, the image of which is often etched out in visual art as kneeling and breastfeeding figures.

Motherhood in this case is symmetrical to the notion of power. While the *Ikunle* (kneeling) posture invokes the process of labour and childbirth, the *Omu Iya* (breastfeeding) deals with the sacred milk of life and nurturing that a mother does a child. But, at a deeper level, the concept of motherhood translates into the *Iyaami* (motherhood cult). Some scholars have erroneous labelled this powerful group as witches, especially for the tendency of the powers to be misused, but the fact actually is that the same power nurtures and protects children and the community, knowing that the latter is itself metaphorically “a child” of the *iyaami*, after all women give birth and populate society (Olajubu,16-33). These different and other levels of female significations are tapped into by Ademilua-Afolayan to construct a dramaturgy that provides alternative perception to female marginalization slogan of Western feminism.

**Ain’t I a Woman?: Engaging the “female” in Bosede Ademilua-Afolayan’s Play**

Although a relatively new entrant into the playwriting landscape since she has two works to her credit at the moment, it is apparent that Bosede Ademilua-Afolayan clearly understands where she is headed. Her first play, *Look Back in Gratitude*, a translation-adaptation of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, examines the family unit with detailed focus on the man/woman relationship, against the backdrop of social dysfunction. In *Once Upon an Elephant*, however, she deploys the knowledge contained in Yoruba oral tradition; the tale of the haughty elephant who falls into a pit in order to construct a drama of intrigue and power. In both plays, the “woman character” is given palpable reality that foregrounds her cultural background in ways which dismantle the notion of oppression, but balances judgement about her weakness and strength.

Unlike some other Nigerian feminist playwrights whose female characters are usually saints, god-like saviours and avatars, Ademilua-Afolayan acknowledges women’s frailties and how same often contribute to issues that undo them. In the “Author’s Note” to the play, *Once Upon an Elephant*, she writes that “[the play] highlights the role of women as causes and sometimes, solution-provider in a story in which they may be complicit” (7). How this weakness often nurtures emotional, psychological and social destabilization forms part of the development of the plot of the play, which addresses what she calls dictatorship, “sit-tightism,” and what political scientists have described as the endemic act of

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13 “Ain’t I a Woman,” is the title of a speech given by Sojourner Truth (1797-1883), the African-American born into slavery in New York.

14 I have borrowed the term “translation-adaptation” from the Mauritian playwright, Dev Virahsawmy, who used it to describe his various reworking of Shakespeare’s plays into Creole language. Also, elsewhere, I examine the play as a reaction to Nigeria’s socio-political situation; see: “No more Jimmy Porter’s Anger, but Jagunlabi’s Rage: Decrying Youth Restiveness through adaptation in *Look Back in Gratitude*” (forthcoming).
self-perpetuation that characterizes African politics. The drama of power manipulation and social destabilization, is set against the background of domestic actions which function in unison to undermine the peace and stability of a close-knit society that is representative of anywhere on the globe where such perpetrations are rife. While she inserts in the plot the role of women in giving birth and nurturing the socio-political monster, she also stresses, through engaging dramatic actions, how ironically, they can also contribute to destroying same for the eventual survival of society.

The play begins at the grove, where Serubawon, the Prime-Minister and friend/medicine man to the ailing King Akinjobi ritually prepares the monarch’s son, Ajanaku, known for his recklessness for the throne. This situation is at first lost on the other elders, Odejimi and Ogundele, whose initial knowledge about the rite is limited. The situation quickly moves to the eventual installation of Ajanaku as King, even as his father lives, contrary to the custom, which dictates that a new king can only be installed at the death of one, and, in most cases, to be succeeded by his first son that, in this case, Ajanaku is not. Ajanaku soon begins a reign of terror. His is apparently a chaotic rule, without any regard for custom or human feelings as revealed in two domestic cases he handles; one involving a dispute over a rich farmland and the appeal for assistance by a neighbouring tribe to help them ward off attacks from aggressive assailants. Rather than resolve the crises amicably in the first, Ajanaku confiscates the land; in the other case, he insists that the grieving tribe must first bring tributes before he can render any assistance. These are also done against the backdrop of “confiscating” women who are betrothed to other men, and the forceful implementation of the Ijedodo rite, which requires that he forcefully have carnal knowledge of virgin girls in order to ensure the continuity of his rule in addition to eternal life.

However, underneath Serubawon’s manipulation of customs is a concealed secret, which involves Iya Agba, the aged senior wife of the former King Akinjobi, who is confined to the outskirts of the land, and regarded by the villagers as a mad woman. She had earlier been accused of adultery (committed with Ajanaku!) by Serubawon, and supported vehemently by his wife, Demoke. Most villagers regard Iya Agba’s supposed act of infidelity as the cause of the king’s strange ailment, or at best the way Serubawon actually intended it. But, Desola’s strange illness, which begins after she is raped by Ajanaku in the forest as part of Ijedodo rite soon changes the entire history of calumny and exposes the pact between the heartless and corrupt kingmaker and his arrogant installed puppet. It also instigates actions, which lead to the revelation of many concealed truth to the chagrin of the assembled community.

As the thickening plot unfolds, Desola’s life is shown to be at stake. She deteriorates gradually without being dead, while Ajanaku’s consecration into a god during the annual Jobele festival, which is the final rite and step towards immortality also approaches. In order to save her daughter’s life, Demoke seeks the support of her friend, Iyale in order to get across to and seek Iya Agba’s help. Iyale
happens to be the only one in the entire land, with enough understanding about Iya Agba’s state of mind. Although she shares this sense of discernment with her husband, Odejimi, the only difference being that while she follows her conviction to the end, he is often trapped between doubts and lonesomeness, especially as a member of the King’s governing council, which has been torn apart by greed. Iyale knows full well that contrary to social speculation, Iya Agba is not mad, but full of wisdom.

Soon, every other person who matters in the land assembles at Iya Agba’s house, including Serubawon who confesses to being remotely responsible for his daughter’s situation and the lie which destroyed Iya Agba’s reputation. He also reveals the fact that Ajanaku is actually his son, through the illicit affair he had with Akinjobi’s younger wife, for which Iya Agba was framed and lied against. In order for the lie not to be exposed, Serubawon arranges for Ajanaku, then a young boy, to go into her bathroom while she had her bath to suggest that she was having illicit sexual relation with the boy. This was done to manipulate the fact of Serubawon’s betrayal of his friend, the king, and Adebisi’s infidelity, in case Iya Agba attempted to expose them. Apparently it worked, as Iya Agba is banished from the land, labelled a witch and ostracised except for occasional visits from Iyale, who remains convinced of her innocence and sanity.

In this epic of political intrigue and social dilemma, the three levels of womanhood are carefully delineated by Ademilua-Afolayan through characterization. She also demonstrates how each one is connected to the other through a compact narrative style and dramatic suspense. The dutiful and obedient daughter is represented by Desola who maintains her chastity, in spite of being very much in love with Odekunle whom she meets secretly in the forest. Her reaction to a nightmare, in which she becomes a laughing stock for not being able to sing her *Ekun iyawo* (bridal chant) on her wedding night, is indicative of her devotion to native customs, and protection of her family’s integrity. In recalling the nightmare, she emphasizes the interface of village pride and lineage shame, which often accompany any young girl whose chastity is discovered to have been lost on the night of her marriage. This is symbolized by the failure of the groom to produce a stained white handkerchief after the first sexual encounter with his bride. From this perspective, one can understand why she refuses to be consoled in her outburst after falling victim of Ajanaku’s act;

**Yosola:** I don’t know. Desola, what are you saying? Who did what?

**Desola:** Ah, Yosola, I am finished. Look at them… people, many people, drinking, laughing and waiting for my own white handkerchief with my pride glowing. But, there will be no white handkerchief…only ashes of shame, torn baskets, gunpowder and jeers!

**Yosola:** Don’t say that.

**Desola:** He has taken it, Yosola. He…took it! (58).

Desola tearfully summarizes the shame and the likelihood of conflict and war which are attendant to a young girl being found already deflowered by another man on her wedding night. The scene is equally
of importance to buttress her character’s signification in the play. Not even Odejimi (Odekunle’s father), who proves to be the most outspoken challenger of both Serubawon and Ajanaku, could have been persuaded not to do something rash in that circumstance.

Although it might be construed as youthful exuberance, there is also a sense of communal reality in Dele’s reaction and impatience towards Odekunle’s tearful narration of how Desola was raped by Ajanaku, while he watched, albeit in grief; “They were armed; is that what you did, trying to find out if they were armed or not, while they took your woman’s pride?” (51). Though “Iku ya j’esin” (Death is more honourable than shame), appears to be his counsel to Odekunle given that circumstance, the latter’s helplessness in front of armed men and alone in the bush remains a factor that cannot be overlooked. We may well ask; “What could he have done?” and Yele’s explains it well: “Whether a gun has a trigger or not, who would permit it to be pointed at his head?” (54). He maintain that no should blame Odekunle for coming to his friends at such time of great emotional need even though the secret love meetings with Desola was without their knowledge in the first place, after all “Whoever conceals a disease from his medicine man is beyond help” (53). But, when Dele demands that they openly challenge Ajanaku, reason takes over youthful exuberance. In Lere’s opinion, “whatever we must do should be done with caution. We are talking about challenging a king. This is different from setting trap for rodents in the bush” (55). Yet, if managing “the leftover” as Dele says of Desola, is enough for Odekunle who has chosen to cry rather than act, and even if it meant death, it is not as simple for Desola who cries to her parents “He has killed me, Baami. He dragged me out completely naked… out of this honourable house, into the jeering laughter in the market place. I am naked and empty!” (59).

The weight of the tragedy appears obviously too much for Serubawont to bear when he found out. Listening to Desola describe only the theatrics “The kolanut farm. Then he came with his guards…all armed. Then they seized Odekunle…and gripped me..!” (60), he quickly realizes that it is own rodent that the trap he set for others actually caught. The madness Iya Agba perceives when she came to the palace comes out full blown when Serubawon confronts Ajanaku over using Desola for the Ijedodo rite. On the one hand is Serubawon who suddenly realizes that everything he has done until that very moment was to ensnare himself in self-imposed intrigue and deceit, which can only be helped by coming clean and open; on the other hand is a wily rascal, who understands all along that Serubawon was using him to gain position and prominence, but pretends not to know. As Ajanaku tells Serubawon in that encounter; “But, you should thank me for keeping my word. I keep my words, Serubawon, for you and me to maintain our positions; you the chief priest, and me, the miserable king at the mercy of the chief priest, and don’t question my judgement about it!” . He also adds, “But, just be honest with me for once, Serubawon. You didn’t find any of my brothers willing to run errands for you, so you picked me […] But it is you who hold the rope and the hook in your hand. And me? Just the miserable fish swallowing gullibly and hungrily without sense. So whatever appeals to you, you do with the hook, the rope and fish. How brilliant can that be!” (63).In this brief, but highly dramatic and emotional encounter,
Ademilua-Afolayan clearly shows the total breakdown of the apparatus of deceit, especially when it comes in contact with its product.

However, Serubawon is apparently not in the palace to argue about who takes what position. All he wants are answers to the ailment that has befallen his daughter. He also queries why she has to be the victim and not someone else. In response Ajanaku also queries, “Who should it have been? When did we start making specific selection about the virgin that serves our purpose […] A rite is a rite; and so must be performed; that was your very word!” (64-5). The truth in this last statement is not only enough, it destroys the very essence, if any, that Serubawon embodies as he breaks down in uncontrollable tears. Of much significance, however, is Desola’s virgin blood that Ajanaku’s rite of Ijedodo feeds on, and which will reach its highest level of potency on the instance of the Jobele festival, at which Ajanaku will attain immortality. Having had carnal knowledge of Desola, albeit forcefully, the process is set in motion, as manifested in the seizure of her menstrual flow, and the gradual deterioration of her health. As Serubawon tells us in tears, “She will neither eat nor drink; or even be consoled. Every single day is spent in pain, and you caused it” (65).

Kristeva’s notion of the power inherent in a woman’s menstruation as opposed to a bundle of headache Beauvoir sees is underlined by Desola’s state of health. As it were, menstrual flow and virgin blood are not only inseparable companions, but sine qua non of a rite meant to transform a mortal being into a state of immortality, which translates as—death to Desola, and invincibility for Ajanaku. The rationale behind such a contraption needs to be looked at, at least briefly. Although the fact remains that neither Serubawon, who imagines and sets in motion the dastard process, nor Ajanaku who plays the “scapegoat-cum-angel” role could have thought that things will turn out as they have done, the fact remains that such hearts, which conceived of it in the first place, has passed redemption. This rite and related acts, draw attention to the stupidity of the human mind as it conceives things beyond its powers, or how else does one describe Serubawon’s intention regarding this rite for Ajanaku in the first place? How does one even reconcile the fact that with Desola’s obedience to customs and parents though in love, she would end up being the cannon-fodder in her father’s apparent war with the community? Certainly this is how it all seem, or the lesson Ademilua-Afolayan intends to draw attention to here, that if anyone decides to manipulate a whole system for their greedy purpose, knowing full well the implication, it is as good as waging a war with the society. But, the fact that Desola (perhaps the opposite of her father, and to some extent her mother as I will show later on) has to fall victim, and suffer the kind of fate that befalls her, is perhaps a case of the evil that men do living not after them, but with them.

Furthermore, while Desola represents the good and obedient as it were, conversely, Omoyeni, who abandons her fiancé, to marry Ajanaku presents us with another side of the obinrin reality. At first it is unclear why she decides to leave Delani who has put in so much, including years of hard labour in
her father’s smithy just to marry her; the only clear reason being that she desires royalty and wealth. Her action was not only the subject of serious debate in the land but also of controversy among his friends who used “the cord of friendship to sever the cord of truth” (55). However, Omoyeni displays one of the most unusual character traits in the play. Although she consents to Ajanaku’s love advances and moves into the palace with him as wife, she does not stop loving her heartthrob, Delani, to the extent that she becomes heavy with his child unknown to the king, who thinks the pregnancy is his. Her reason is both thought-provoking and fearful, providing us with the opportunity to reflect on the extent to which obinrin’s passion and drive can go.

**Omoyeni:** He threatened me. Ajanaku threatened me. I love Delani, and have not stopped loving him [...] He could have killed my parents [And] who could have stopped him from doing so? I had to give in to his love advances to protect my parents, and the man I love (76).

One may well add that, “Who can actually know the heart of a woman!” will just be an appropriate remark to summarize Omoyeni’s brace antic (?); and on the other hand, Ademilua-Afolayan’s tap into the Yoruba aphorism “Obinrin o see so” (Women cannot be put under surveillance), will just aptly sum up the messy situation that her action has created. Besides, the act in itself brings to mind the ability of obinrin to straddle the world between pain and pleasure; reality and illusion, including genuine passion and dubious emotionality.

At the end, Omoyeni’s pregnancy will serve a very significant purpose in resolving the crisis in the land; this also works on two levels of symbolic and ritual signification which makes dramatic sense. First is the sustained relationship between her and Delani (in spite of Ajanaku’s shameless intervention), and which is not determined by position, social status or wealth, especially considering that he is only an orphan and blacksmith. The emphasis here is on unconditional love. There is also the parable of “Fila l’obinrin, eni ba w’ori e lo ma a de” (Woman is a cap, whosoever’s head it fits, wears it), which elaborates on the fact of love being a case of compatibility between the male/female gender and not of force or coercion. Second, and most significant in this specific context, is the sacred value of a fresh blood in the new born child, symbolically washing the land of its shame and decay, as exemplified by both Serubawon and Ajanaku. Further still, the role of mothers as givers of life and the protectors of same is clearly demonstrated by Omoyeni who bluntly refuses to let her pregnancy be used as material for ritual to save Desola’s life (it is simply a test of her love for the unborn baby by Iya Agba as it eventually appears); and then, the importance of the blood women shed at childbirth, being central to the continuity of life as well as the sustenance of a society, is equally demonstrated by the fact of the child’s birth being the climax of Ajanaku’s failed attempt at immortality, and the final resolution of the play.

While motherhood is respected on these bases as Ademilua-Afolayan would want us to believe, Demoke and Adebisi represent the other side of the obinrin reality that the play highlights. Although
the Yoruba adage “Obinrin l’eke; obinrin l’odale” (Women are the liars and the cheat/traitors),\textsuperscript{15} encapsulates this aspect of femaleness that Ademilua-Afolayan punches, she also balances her argument with the “Iya ni wura” (Mother is gold) metaphor at the same time with Demoke’s reaction to her daughter’s mysterious ailment. In the play, while Adebisi’s indecency results in the sickness and apparent death of the former king, Demoke’s testimony against Iya Agba is no less grievous. To even think that the trap set for Iya Agba was many years after the crime Adebisi committed with Serubawon, the thought of it alone underlines her (Adebisi) level of cruelty and the guilt she suffers. Considering also that Iya Agba only wanted her to desist from the act, and so did not report the incident to their husband but warned her instead, shows the stark difference between the two; while Iya Agba is matured, good-natured and sincere, Adebisi is slippery, untrustworthy and mean.

On the other hand, Demoke’s testimony about Iya Agba’s supposed adultery with her step-son requires some kind of psychological probing. In the first place, there is no instance of her committing any crime whatsoever not to talk of one as grievous as infidelity, which could suggest the possibility of Iya Agba really being suspected and proclaimed guilty. Also, being the king’s wife and a senior one at that, one wonders if there is no sense of respect from Demoke towards her. Lastly, knowing that she did not witness the said crime, one can only imagine the level of influence (or love?) that Serubawon has over her (or her for him). However, it is easy considering that some women who, for whatever reason, have remained barren in their matrimony like Iya Agba, have always been viewed with great suspicion. They are also susceptible to various accusations some of which often turn out to be untrue. But, as the saying goes “Abiyamo kii gb’ekun omo e, koma ta ti were” (No good mother will hear her baby’s cries without flinching in response), Demoke quickly throws shame and guilt aside when she realizes that Iya Agba might just be the only saving grace for her daughter to live. She subscribes to Olajubu’s notion that the “Ikunle abiyamo” (Position of kneeling at childbirth), which signifies women’s experience of pain and labour during child birth, could be invoked as a potent force for action (Olajubu,16). In the presence of all, she also invokes the same potent force while begging Iya Agba, “Iya Agba, I beg you. I know I do not deserve being in your presence for what I have done. But, for the sake of motherhood, help me (73). Despite Iya Agba’s quip “What do you know about motherhood?” (73), she is not the type who turns her back at such a crucial moment. But, for the sake of motherhood, help me (73). Despite Iya Agba’s quip “What do you know about motherhood?” (73), she is not the type who turns her back at such a crucial moment, not even when it is Desola, her “child” that is involved as Iyale tells us, or the fact that without being told, she knows too well that evil must never be allowed to prevail over goodness and truth.

As such, we are introduced to Iya Agba’s transformation into the Iya Nla (Supreme Mother), or the Iyaami in the play. It is quite interesting that, for someone already confined to the outskirts of the land and deemed insane by the same people, Iya Agba’s becoming the rallying point for the entire society’s survival from the throes of a selfish kingmaker’s act of deceit and grips of the tyrant king.

\textsuperscript{15} This is/are mere proverbial statements to specifically point at undesirable attitude, and not meant to be terms of qualification for women generally.
including the awesome power of the rite to attaining immortality that feeds on young girls (Desola is actually the sixth virgin to be used) is near magical and significant. She can be considered in the light of Olajubu’s description of the traditional Yoruba woman as someone who upholds the underlying principles of the people’s philosophy, especially the crucial aspect of humanistic feminism displayed in attitude, and not necessarily determined by her location in the society. According to Olajubu, these type of women combine *ikunle abiyamo*, the *omu iya*, and much more, in their embodiment of the elements of the supreme motherhood. They hold the secrets of the land, and are relevant in the socio-cultural and political spheres of the society (16).

Still, Iya Agba embodies this type of womanhood in many ways. Aside from her ability to keep secrets as earlier mentioned, and sense of decency which accompanied her reaction to her younger wife’s act of infidelity, her own faithfulness to her husband despite not having children for him is worthy of note. When she is first introduced to the audience, her utterances appear out of tune with what others are saying, though her deep love and respect for her late husband is apparent in her speech. She appears really “mad” especially when she calls Ajanaku a bastard. When she says “The lizard may resemble a crocodile, but they are certainly different” (36), one tends to ask who the lizard and/or crocodile is, but with Ajanaku’s response that “Madness is the worst enemy of memory; you lose every sense of time, and roam the streets in mental darkness” (36), one realizes her “situation”. Also, when Serubawon enters into the scene, and she urges him “Isn’t it timely that we three are together after all these years? Why not tell him, that he might know who he really is?” (40), we are again thrown off balance, and our suspicion begins to grow. One may be tempted to ask; “Is Ajanaku’s taunt really true after all, or is Iya Agba simply a social nuisance who finds the palace worthy enough to display her insanity?” But, such questions are cut short as she is bundled out of the palace by the palace guards on the instance of Serubawon, who is equally disturbed as Ajanaku by her sudden presence in the palace. But, why and, for what reason, if there is any? The answer is saved for some time later, when it is more exigent to be revealed as we later find out.

However, Iya Agba’s symbolic presence as the rallying point starts to get fully established as Iyale and the rest, including the youth (Odekonle the grieving lover-boy and his bosom friends) invade her once-deserted home in search of remedy to Desola’s ailment, which sucks her virgin blood. Having realised that Desola has fallen victim of the rite he concocted with Ajanaku, Serubawon also comes to Iya Agba for help in order to undo his evil, and possibly save his daughter. As it happens, the only remedy that can save Desola is known by Iya Agba, not even Serubawon the king’s medicine man. According to Olajubu, in the religious space, women sometimes function as priestesses and votary maids in which they constitute the bridge between mortals and the divine, or as custodians of ritual powers that sustain the community (25). They also constitute membership of one of the secret

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16 The famous Arugba Osun of the world-acclaimed Osun Osogbo festival in Nigeria is a superb example here. The Osun grove is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
organizations of the highest level of recognition in any society; that they can keep secrets should not necessarily be a surprise. In this case, however, Iya Agba becomes the bridge across the ritual path that can free Desola from the throes of death, and unlock the power of Ijedodo rite that both Serubawon and Ajanaku have unleashed on the land. But, being clever is part of this process as she demonstrates when Serubawon tells her/them what he has done “How can you be so terribly wicked? Ijedodo has no cure. It feeds on the blood of the virgin to keep whoever has done it alive, while the virgin dies a slow and painful death!”(74).

But, there is certainly a cure, which she does not reveal as part of her ability to keep secrets, of the esoteric nature in this circumstance. As it turns out, the cure is in the dying virgin meeting the person who had initiated/perform the rite in a similar fashion of the initial position of sexual intercourse, that is, chest against chest, even if it is in a symbolic way. This is the ultimate expression of the male/female convergence that the Ifa verse quoted above hints at. Although the syntax may be entirely different, but the description of human creation in Surah Al-Tariq (The Night Visitant, 86) of the Holy Qur’an is a very interesting comparison

Now let man but think from what he is created!
He was created from a drop, emitted—
Proceeding from between the back-bone and the ribs (5-7).

By “back-bone” and “the ribs” the Holy Scripture refers to both the male and female genitalia in a way which conforms to the decency of its nature as a holy book, and especially economical use of words for which the Islamic scripture is renowned.

Of significant cultural reality is the way Ademilua-Afolayan describes the build-up to the climactic moment of the play in the stage directions. Here, she appears to deploy in full blast, the male/female convergence that underlies the Yoruba cosmogony, and especially the recognition of the female personality in the spiritual structure upon which the society is placed. This needs to be quoted in full because of the other cultural details, which help to foreground its ritualistic, and embracing cultural reality

Palace. Jobele festival. Music, and dancing. Everybody is present. They are all dressed in wrapper, all bare-chested except the women, who tie a wrapper around their bosoms [...] Iya Agba comes in, with Iyale, Demoke and Yosola. They are all dressed in white, with girdle round their waists. [...] Odekunle enters with his friends; he has a calabash which he places at his feet. Desola suddenly lurches forward, and embraces Ajanaku. They both stagger. She pulls back, but holds on to the neck of his white apparel, and tears it into shreds. She staggers and falls face down on the throne. Odekunle quickly opens the calabash, brings out a red cloth sewn with gourds and charms, runs to Ajanaku and places it round his neck. Ajanaku screams as Odekunle steps away. People watch with utter consternation and shock. Ajanaku gradually begins to react in a strange way as he goes down slowly (78-9).
Within the lines of this stage direction, the male/female complementarity is demonstrated in its capacity to save a life, overpower tyranny, cleanse the land of filth and decay occasioned by acts which desecrated it in the first place, and to open the door to a new beginning. But, a number of symbols are used, which we need to point out. According to Ademilua-Afolayan, the people are “all dressed in wrapper, all bare chested except the women” to show the very importance of the female body and how Yoruba culture places value on it and so emphasizes that it is covered even in such a highly-charged ritual context; Iya Agba and others, coming in “with girdle round their waists” suggestive/symbolic of the mothers’ oja (girdle) with which they back and care for their children. As Olajubu reminds us, the “mother” and “child” relationship is regarded by the Yoruba as the strongest kind of bond (16); Desola “embraces Ajanaku” to symbolize the renewal of the “pact” signed by the first sexual encounter, but in this case, being an act which neutralizes the first act of subjection to slow and painful death; she pulls back and holding onto the neck of his dress, “tears it into shred” symbolizing the total destruction of both his power/charm over her life and the collapse of his monarchy and power over the society as a whole; then staggering to fall “face down on the throne” to suggest using the power she has regained from the body contact and renewal of her spiritual strength to cleanse the throne of filth that Ajanaku’s sitting on it has accumulated over the years; and finally, Odekonle placing a red cloth round Ajanaku’s neck, symbolizes the reversal of role and position, of replacement of filth with purity, of death with life, of tribulation with hope, as contained in the symbolism of the white and red clothes. As assurance of renewal, Iya Agba’s response to Ogundele’s question, which he makes out of total consternation about the import of the ritual the people just observed, sums up the whole explanation

**Ogundele:** What have you done?

**IyaAgba:** To who?

**Ogundele:** Him!

**IyaAgba:** Ask him. Is he not your king? *(To Demoke)* Go get your daughter. She will live (79).

Indeed, after the sacrifice, we are no longer in the dark as Omoyeni who once remarked, “Everybody says Iya Agba is mad, but Iyale says Iya Agba understands […] But, I don’t really know what Iya Agba understands (67). Well, at least, we know!

**Conclusion: Abo o mire, but not the final word.**

In this paper, I argue that feminism denigrates cultural practices without paying attention to sacred values attached to them and their relevance to any specific reality such as the Yoruba, and that female Nigerian playwrights have also used their works to pursue such line of argument. However, in *Once Upon an Elephant*, Bosede Ademilua-Afolayan provides an alternative reality to such a perception. I

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17 *Abo o mi re, “I draw the curtain here”—Yoruba saying.*
also argue that, through her play, she presents a body of knowledge that stresses essence, unlike existentialism which emphasizes existence above essence, including its influence on feminist theory championed by Simone de Beauvoir. In doing this, she deploys epistemological reality from the Yoruba, who seek the value of life within the essence of being. The cultural notion is that human beings are part and parcel of creation, as a result, life is lived intensely in community. This aspect of Yoruba belief is demonstrated through the shared reality of the complementary relationship between the male and female gender, symbolized by the *Ele* metaphor. Conclusively, I stress the significance of the male and female gender, from the cultural/literary perspective of her play, as an expression of the duality of the Yoruba universe, and how that knowledge is relevant to understanding other literary approaches to the issue of feminism in contemporary Nigerian plays.

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