

Genesis 2:18-23 and the Patriarchal African Cultures: A Subjugation of Women

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Abstract

Traditional African Religions and culture however are rife with structures which highlight the important of women and at the same time possesses features which subjugate women to subservient role, which can be found in the belief in women's creation as inferior human beings and various forms of subjugation. Hackett (1985: 248) views that the area of traditional society and religion is both insinuating and ambiguous as far as women are concerned, within the context; women have been credited with mystical power and at the same time subjected to restrictive taboos and attitudes. Perhaps, we can better understand why women are discriminated against by the men like in most traditional societies through what ElechiAmadi calls "an inbuilt fear" of women by men. Wotogbe –Weneka (2003: 219) citing Amadi says "men believe that women have the power which they cannot match or control". This power is obviously sexual power. Every woman has it, and every normal man is susceptible to it. The power is awesome because the women cannot be deprived of it. From historical approach, it has been discovered that women have always been suppressed even from the bible times. Therefore, this research suggests that for equality of human kind and equalitarian society, obnoxious African cultures should be discarded and women given their pride of place.

Introduction

We must not lose sight of the fact that, there are in existence, the suppression of women in Nigeria, in particular societies which still feel that women should be made second class citizens at all cost and hence in such societies, cases of institutionalized discriminatory practices abound even as in the bible times. Ironically, however, reasons often given in such discriminations against women sound unconvincing since the reasoning is based on human values most of which are masterminded by their men folk. For instance, it is argued that women should be excluded from certain roles because they bear and suckle children and so should be tied to the domestic scene for much of their lives, while their men folk whose tasks are those that call for extra physical strength and agility, and which take them away from home most of the times are adjudged ritual experts (Wotogbe – Woneka, 2003: 220)

Similarly, in most African traditional societies, women are excluded alongside children whenever major decisions affecting their socio-cultural destiny are being discussed in the false believe that women are of inconsequential relevance in the traditional society. Women and their concerns are generally looked upon as secondary importance and indeed an afterthought, and hence many social and ritual taboos (Many DONTs) are hedged around them in such traditional societies. That is why most of the ritual and social laws (usually made by men) are always against women (Wotogbe – Woneka, 2003: 223).

Conceptual Definitions/Clarification

Description of the following terms will be made for fuller understanding of the paper.

- (a) **Patriarchal:** This is a society, family or system in which the men have all or most of the power and importance. Asma Barlas defines Patriarchal in both its narrow and broad forms. According to her patriarchy is believed to be a historically specific mode of role by fathers and broadly as a politics of sexual differentiation that privileged males by “transforming biological sex into politicized different (unequal) less than, or the other” (Barlas, 2004: 12).

In its simplest form, patriarchy connotes the system by which the authority of man must unconditionally be established whereby nothing good or important comes from the woman’s end. In other words, women must necessarily be under the control of men. In this instance, women have no say at all in the decision making process both at the familial and societal levels. This may be seen in many ways. It may be perpetuated against daughters, wives and/ or mothers. As a daughter, she is made to serve as a wife; she is expected to nurture children for the good of the society (Kausar, 1997: 9)

- (b) **Culture:** This seems to be one of the commonest words within the social sciences and humanities and in ordinary usages, outside academics. As a product and concomitant of human living and interaction, it has been conferred with different meanings over the years (Iheanacho, 2012: 50). In a wider and popular sense, culture is simply a people’s way of life. Leading sociologists and cultural theorists like Robert Boccock (1992) have outlined and explained the various conceptions and usages of the word culture.

According to Tylor, culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, moral, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor, 1871). UNESCO defines it to mean:

- (c) **Subjugation:** This refers to a group of people being under complete control of others, especially defeat. *The whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letter,* something (Hornby, 2000: 11)

- (d) **Patriarchy:** *but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being (UNESCO, 1982}.* out of the perception of the bible ahead of their interpretation in the

biblical account to place restriction on women in order to oppress them. For instance, reference to Deut. 22:5 where the bible commands that it is an abomination of the order of creation for a woman to wear anything that pertains to a man. Looking at the preceding and exceeding verses, there was no agreement.

Verse 4 spoke only of an ideal brotherhood and verse 6 talked clearly on sympathy towards other living creatures by Homosapiens. This no doubt revealed the hypocrisy of a male dominating society who by whatever reason inserted verse 5 where it ordinarily was not supposed to begin. Unfortunately, philosophers and theologians who came after the patriarchs built upon their blunders. For instance, Socrates in his writing said ‘women are necessary evil’. Aristotle came up to say women are not fully human because they are deficient in what is uniquely human.

Every male Jew opens his jaw to say “Blessed are thou O God, King of the universe who has not made me a woman”. Church fathers that were expected to express some fairness because of their Christian influence were not any different. For instance, Tertullian said “A woman is the devil’s gate way” John Chrysostom added a salvo and said “Among all the wild beasts, there is none more harmful than women (Abogunrin cited in Oyewole, 2012: 208 -209).

Examination of Gen 2:18-33 in Relationship with Gen 1:27-28

Kabaneilwe (2015: 694 – 703) infers that the creation accounts of Genesis 1&2 are especially intriguing. In both chapters, there is an overarching idea that runs repeatedly across. This is the expression at the end of every creature activity namely “God saw that it was good”. In summary, God looked at everything He made, it was good, so very good (Gen. 1:31a). It is important to note that there is a slight difference in the two chapters concerning especially the creation of human kind. In Gen.1:27-28, it reads thus:

So God Created mankind in His own image in the image of God he created them, male and female. God blessed them and said to them be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground (NIV).

However in Gen. 2:18-23, we encounter a slight inconsistency in the following:

The Lord God said,” it is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him”. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep and while he was sleeping he took one of the man’s ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the lord God made a woman from the rib he has taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man (NIV).

In examining these passages, she asks, the question is which version of the creation of human gendered bodies, namely male and female should one go by? Was the male gendered body created first as suggested in Gen.2 above or were the two gendered bodies, male and female, created simultaneously as stated in Gen1. As noted, the creation accounts of Gen. 1&2 might have instigated or perpetuated the inequality between humans as gendered male and female, and between human and non humans. The inconsistency in the creation of humankind noted above may have undoubtedly played an important role in the inequality between men and women, to the detriment of the latter (Mmapula cited in Kabaneilwe, 2015: 697).

A quite problematic issue that has mostly contributed to the inequality between men and women is the creation of man and woman in the account of Gen.2:18-23, which claims that the male gendered human body was created first and that the female gendered human body was created second out of the male’s body and for his sake (Kabaneilwe, 2015: 697). The woman created as a ‘helper ‘ or ‘supporter’ (Isa.30:5. Exo. 18:4).

An interesting point has been raised by Carolyn C. James with regard to the issue when she insists that:

Eve’s forgotten legacy resides in explicit statement God made when he created her. God created Eve to be his image bearer “in his image and likeness” –and second, to be the *ezer*, or the strong helper. Furthermore, she shared Adam what theologians call “Cultural Mandate” – God’s command to be fruitful and multiply, to rule and subdue the earth (2001: 31).

James implies, though indirectly, that neither Gen1 nor 2 presumes some inequality between the human gendered bodies of men and women. None of the two is superior over the other. If anything, a woman’s role as assigned at creation is quite vital to the entire sense of multiplication as a mandate to humanity from God. Thus, an *ezer* “helper” she has a shared duty

with her male other, that of reproduction which may not be done by either one on their own. According to such a perspective, failure to become equal partners as men and women may render humanity a failure to multiply and fill the earth''. Therefore, it makes sense to suggest that contrary to the dominant patriarchal structure of our world, God's plan at creation; was to have humanity in two equally genders of male and female, both in his image and likeness. Pursuing a somewhat radical slant, one woman once said 'we (i.e. women) are the root from which the people sustains itself and grows (Kabanailwe, 2015: 698).

African Cultures/Women Subjugation

We need to start at the beginning and see what the bible teaches about God's creation of woman. What was the plan of God concerning the female half of the human race? Gen.1: 27 tells us of God creating both male and female in his image. This statement shows that when God created human being, there was no difference in importance or value between men and women. They were both created by God in his image (O'Donovan, 2000: 193).

Due to cultural differences advanced mainly by God. This deviation brought about abuses on the women who are seen as inferior persons in the African culture. These culturally allowed abuses include the following:

- (a) **Wife-beating:** Because men are generally stronger than women, it is all too common in many parts of the world for men to physically abuse women. This is often true in the home situation where men will beat their wives. Wife-beating also has something to do with the culture and the expectations of a culture. For this reason, this evil practice is even carried out by some Christian husbands in Africa. Such a practice dishonours the wife as an equal partner made in the image of God. The bible says, "Husbands in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayer (1Pet.3:7,O' Donovan, 2000: 199)
- (b) **Female Genital Mutilation:** The practice can cause a lifelong problem for women in many different ways. A government health publication in Ethiopia list ten severe problems resulting from female genital mutilation (Leaflet 2, Addis Ababa, National committee on traditional practices of Ethiopia, cited in O'Donovan, 2000: 199). These problems include severe pain, serious bleeding, shock, general infection, urine retention, tetanus, infection, pain and laceration with sexual intercourse, the possibility of AIDS infection, urinary tract infection and pelvic infection. In addition to these problems women who have been subjected to female genital mutilation will experience considerably greater pain and difficulty in childbirth, sometimes resulting in death to either the mother or the child.
- (c) **Rape and Sexual Harassment:** Women are also abused by men through rape and other forms of sexual harassment. This is as a result of inability of men controlling their sexual desires and using their physical strength to protect women instead of harming them. The recent cases of female abduction of Chibok girls and that of Anglican School in Lagos are clearly evident.
- (d) **Birth Purification:** There is a parallel belief among traditional Africans. Among the Ikwerre people of Rivers State (in the olden days), a woman who gives birth to a boy-child is required to sleep on plantain leaves at the birth place for four days, after which the mother and the child are brought into the house, whereas for a girl-child, the period is doubled to eight days as if the experiences and procedures of child birth differ from a male child to female. Among the Tiv of Benue State, sexual intercourse with a nursing mother is forbidden until a period of three years. The belief been that she is adjudged so impure at this period that if sexual intercourse is had with her, the man would die, and if she becomes pregnant, she would die while giving birth to the child except proper cleansing and rituals are undertaken. (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2003: 225).

Besides, it is believed that she would pass on her ritual impurities; therefore, we can now discern that most ritual laws in the case of traditional Africans are selfishly geared towards the protection of the men folk at the detriment of the women.

The Ijaws and Igbos also believe that menstruating women are so impure that they cannot touch or cook their husbands' food especially when the husband is a titled man (Bekeonwei cited in Wotogbe-Woneka, 2003: 225). That is why Rosalind Hackett after her research findings could report that in many parts of Africa, women are subjected to numerous rites of purification at the death of their husbands (Hackett, 80 cited in Wotogbe-Weneka, 2003: 225).

Several restrictions are imposed on women in many African traditional societies. In Nnewi of Anambra State, women are forbidden from touching sacred objects such as Ofo (staff of Justice), or even plucking and breaking of Kolanuts considered an important sacred symbol among the Igbos (Nwosu cited in Wotogbe-Weneka, 2003:227). Also in Ohihi Ezinihite of Imo State, a woman cannot pour libation to the ancestors and if she does, she would be stoned to death instantly. In Ibibio of Akwa Ibom, women are forbidden to see Ekpo (Masquerade) in procession since the Ekpo are believed to be ghost of the ancestors. And so, women who can never be initiated into the Ekpo cult cannot be trusted with keeping secrets about the cult, hence they are forbidden from watching the procession (Ekanem cited in Wotogbe-Weneka, 2003: 228).

Conclusion

The promotion of equality between the sexed or gendered bodies has the potential of leading to equality between all people across cultures, races, colours, religions, classes, sexual orientations and preferences. Conversely, as long as the male others continue to think of themselves as superior over the female others, we are far from achieving our goal in terms of appreciating everything and everyone around us. If men could begin to see inherent goodness in women, who are their own kind, in the name of humanity and treat them as equal partners one would have no problem accepting those others who are not of the same sexual orientation, social class, race, religion etcetera (Kabaneilwe, 2015: 702).

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