Sexual Objectification and Bartering System in Clement Idegwu's Poetry

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Abstract

Artistic writings capture experiences, behaviours, worldviews and practices of people in society. Apart from prose and dramatic works that convey these subjects, the genre of poetry has equally played vital role for critical appraisal and documentation. Issues pertaining to politics, commerce, religion, healthcare, science and technology, to mention a few, are being interrogated through poetic forms. This work examines sexual objectification and commercialization with a view to establishing how female characters indulge in consensual sexual bartering in Clement Idegwu's *Life is a Tempest.* The study adopts Marxist strand of feminist theoretical approach. The poems were purposively selected from the poetry collection based on their thematic thrust and subjected to qualitative analysis, using descriptive and analytical methods. The study shows that women offer themselves as commercial commodities, exchanging their bodies for actualization of their goals, dreams and

aspirations. It exposes and decries sexual (self)objectification and bartering practice which is prevalent among female characters in financial, religious and educational institutions. This contemporary sexual impulsivity is not unconnected with the socio-economic situation in Africa, particularly Nigeria.

Keywords: Female objectification, poetry, sexuality, culture, globalization

Introduction

Literary productions are reflections and refractions of individual experiences and challenges of society where they are produced. Through literary works, writers interrogate both primordial and contemporary issues in various fields of study such as economics, cultural studies, religion, engineering, medicine, legal studies, as well as science and technology. In Economics, barter system was in vogue before money was introduced as a legal tender and so it is traceable to the primordial period where people exchange goods for other goods and services. It was cumbersome but prevalent as people attained their goals. Sexual behavioural patterns of people could be likened to bartering system in socio-cultural settings and studies have shown the abnormal behaviours contribute adversely to the moral bankruptcy. Literary texts are the reflections of writer's psychological dispositions and experiences of individuals in societies. They are imaginative and creative products of the writer's personal experiences, observations and intuitive knowledge carefully knitted into a complete artistic work and release for audience to interpret.

Writers' literary works could be expository, didactic or reformatory, interrogating individual problems and societal ills that trigger psychological and emotional conflicts in both the writer and the readers in the society. Although some literary productions are symbolic recreations or re-enactments of primordial experiences of writers, a couple of them are imaginatively employed to expose human foibles with a view to restoring sanctity in society. For instance, literary writers have captured various behavioural patterns of male and female genders in their works which have received adequate scholarly attention in the past decades. This study, therefore, examines sexual objectification and bartering system among female gender as portrayed in Clement Idegwu's poetry, *Life is a Tempest.* It explores

women as commercial sexual commodities in corporate organizations, educational institutions and the society at large.

Commodification of womenfolk

In patriarchal societies, women have been regarded as economic goods and so the male gender such as the capitalist bourgeoisie exploit them to achieve their economic desire of profit making to the detriment of the objects of the sexuality. Prostitution is perceived as commercial transactions that is profitable without considering the psychological and health implication. The objectification of women is becoming prevalent in the past decades and it cuts across societies. In mass media, for instance, there are frequent images of women presented as objects in advertisements by financial institutions, industries and movie producers. However, Awoniyi (2015:5) observes that "African people have various moral and societal values meant to regulate interpersonal relationships and to perpetuate the entire community." Many societies are experiencing drastic moral decadence owing to technological advancement and intercultural transfer. For instance, women have continuously degenerated to the extent of offering themselves as commodities for sale or exchange of their sexual organs for money, promotions, advertisement and even public relations.

Sari *et al* (2020:44) acknowledge Levine (2003) who affirms that "sexual desire is formed by interaction in neuroendocrine system which provokes urges, cognitive process causing desire, and motivation that can cause someone to want to perform sexual behaviour." In contemporary society, aberrational behaviours such as sexual disorders are worsened due to globalization. It is noted that "modern globalization has compressed people of diverse backgrounds, cultures, aspirations and expectations into a small global village where what affects one section affects all sections" (Odeke and Onuoha, 2021:25). Through trans-culturalism, knowledge, skills, practices and behaviours, to mention a few, are acquired. These immaterial products are stored in the human mind which is the reservoir of repressed memories, experiences, emotions and they influence human activities in societies. Shahwan (2017:1) maintains that "the mind is responsible for both conscious and unconscious decisions based on drives and forces. Unconscious desires motivate people to act accordingly." The foregoing studies therefore illuminate the current research that examines sexual objectification and bartering

system among female gender in contemporary society as captured by Clement Idegwu's *Life is a Tempest.*

Methodology

This study is library-based and is devoid of fieldwork activities. It is a qualitative research that involves a critical appraisal of some poems that are purposively selected from Clement Idegwu's collection, *Life is a Tempest*. The chosen poems include "Endangered species", "Your thigh, your rise", "Ojuelegba", "Call girl", "Digging deep" and "No bra day." Since the thrust of this research is to examine sexual objectification and bartering system among female gender in contemporary societies, only relevant poems in the anthology were selected and qualitatively analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Marxist feminist theoretical framework, combining tenets of Marxism and feminist criticisms. Feminism can be viewed from different perspectives but Abdul *et al* (2011:6) finds that "feminism in Nigeria emerged out of the demands of women to improve women's status and eliminate debilitating factors that deprived women of enjoying their full human rights." The welfare of female gender is the focus of feminism from the viewpoint of the above scholars. Ibeku (2015:427) notes that the concept of feminism is "women-oriented and concentrates on issues that concerns women. It is a literary movement that tends to bring about a change in the society especially on how women are treated; it tries to discourage discrimination and humiliation on women; it focuses its attention on emancipation of women." The views of Ibeku (2015) and Abdul *et al* (2011) are extended by Aina (1998) who finds that feminism "has been used within post-1960s feminism to refer to "the methodical coordination of male supremacy and female subordination. Women have always lived under the domination of men as a lower group and have endured marginalization. They were considered inferior to the male folks through a combination of gender-based culture and traditional practices in favour of men" (cited in Dagunduro & Adenugba, 2020:23).

The marginalization of the womenfolk in male dominated societies informed the feminist movement in Europe and America. Oriaku (2012:131) observes that "Marxist schemas identify oppressors and the oppressed, the privileged and the

underprivileged, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, master and servant, the victimiser and the victim." In advancing the foregoing, Oriaku asserts that, "the feminists adopt these categories and ascribe to the male segment of society the unenviable classifications of oppressors, privileged, bourgeoisie, master and victimiser; the woman is the underprivileged and disadvantage person, the victim of perennial social injustice" (131). Hooks (2015: xii) asserts that "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. The movement is triggered by the awareness that the women have equal right with men." the struggle for women liberation can be sustained in societies based on collective effort. Fwangyil (2011:262) establishes that for women to "liberate themselves from male oppression and dominance and also to better their lot in the society, women have tended to organize themselves into socio-political groups." Women view themselves as objects and commodities predominantly in modern societies as they indulge in sexual barter system. This depicts self-objectification which shall be clearly defined and examined in this study as well. The Marxist feminist theory adopted for this research becomes relevant since it interrogates women as economic goods or commodities supplied and purchased in commercial places as evident in the selected poems.

Literature Review

The subjects of sexuality and sexual disorders has received scholarly attention from researchers and literary writers in the past decades. In this study, critical works in relation to the foregoing subject matter shall be reviewed in order to illuminate the current research. Sari, *et al* (2020:44) condemn sexual behaviour and counsel individuals to control their sexual desires. The researchers however noted that premarital sexual behaviour may occur due to sexual desire and reversely sexual self-control is able to repress sexual desire so that the behaviour can be avoided. Kim, *et al* (2013:640) assert that such "unacceptable sexual or unacceptable aggressive urges could be defensively sublimated into socially appropriate pursuits." Studies have revealed that women have perceived themselves as sexual objects. The idea of self-objectification has become prevalent in modern societies owing to the new media, particularly social media platforms like the WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and so on, where some adolescents and women upload their nude photographs and also watch pornographic movies and music.

According to Tanjare (2013:55), Self-objectification refers to the process by which women come to internalize and accept the beliefs that society projects upon them." The concept of self-objectification implies reduction of oneself to a mere object and Tanjare establishes that has been absorbed into the unconscious mind of women. Goyal and Gautam (2022:21) assert that "objectification basically means to present as an object, especially of sight or other physical sense." The scholars maintain that "since time in memorial, women have been observed nothing more than sexual objects." In advancing the above discourse, Goyal and Gautam observe that "women are characterized as an object to some degree of other" and so "the sexual objectification of womenfolk quite often appears in literary works"(21). In relation to sexual behavioural pattern, Kroon and Perez (2013:16) define female self-objectification as the "regular exposure to objectifying experiences that socialize girls and women to engage in self-objectification, whereby they come to internalize this view of themselves as an object or collection of body parts." The above submission illuminates the present current research which focuses on sexual objectification and bartering practices in selected poems. Calogero, *et al* (2011:4) asserts that "western societies tend to objectify people in general, treating them as if they are things, or commodities, because westernized societies are saturated with heterosexuality, whereby gender acts as a pervasive organizer of culture." The researchers trace objectification in western world to the optimal practice of sexual relationships with opposite sex. The findings of research carried out on patriarchy by scholars show that, "men have social power in every important structure of society and that women do not have any real access to such structures. Patriarchy refers to a social system whereby males dominate women" (Zola, 2010:28).

Analysis of Clement Idegwu's Poetry

Clement Idegwu is a prolific writer whose literary productions reflect happenings in contemporary society. Apart from the genre of fiction where he has several publications, the writer has produced some collections of poetry which include *Men for Worms, Cross-Examine* and *Life is a Tempest.* Most of Idegwu's works interrogate a morally bankrupt society where people indulged in corruption, dehumanization, self-objectification, sexual promiscuity and so on. In this study, the main issues that formed our discourse shall be critically examined.

Capitalization and Sexual Promiscuity

Sexual objectification undermines ethical standards, principles and norms that regulate the conduct of members in society. In recent times, the commodification of the bodies of women and girls has become prevalent. It entails reduction of the female gender to an object of sex. The foregoing attributes gender and sexuality to women's body or parts, viewing womenfolk as property of men in society. In the poem, "Endangered species", Clement Idegwu condemns the moral decadence in financial institution where female bankers are given certain target to remain permanent staff. According to the poet: "These condoms for your pretty species/To lure the very rich, their deposits/Target five hundred billion/These names are big fishes/Bait, hook, and retain them/And be retained" (Lines 1-6). The female gender in this case is reduced drastically to mere objects and commodities in modern economy. The poet-persona describes female bankers as baits that are employed and mandated to attract huge deposits to the bank even if they indulge in sexual acts with male clients. Goyal and Gautam (2022:21) note that "whether woman-characters have minor or major roles in poetic plan, they are shown sexually subservient in some way and depicted as submissive to men." The poet-persona presents some of the conversations between a new employee and a bank manager dramatically, thus; "I don't understand" she told her manager/" you don't what?" he asked mischievously/ In between your thighs lies the earthworm/ These fishes can never resist/ Stake it, put them inside, keep them there permanently and rise" (Lines 7-11). It is evident in the poem that female employees are needed as sexual objects to attract wealthy customers.

Scholars also trace sexual objectification of women to the nature of society. According to their findings, "a heterosexual community can be analyzed as a marketplace in which men seek to acquire sex from women by offering other resources in exchange. Societies will therefore define gender roles as if women are sellers and men buyers of sex" (Baumeister, *et al*., 2004:339). The above submission is clarified through the study of Szymanski, *et al* (2011:6) that objectification theory analyses the sociocultural contexts that reduce women to their bodies or body parts and associate a woman's value with her appearance and sexual purposes." Idegwu compares men to "fishes" in the river which do not resist "the earthworm". He asserts that banking job is assured "permanently" if female bankers offer themselves as "corporate prostitutes". Promotion to enviable heights

in the banking industry in modern society is also based on the amount of financial deposits received through staff especially the female bankers. This is reported, thus: "The sky, your springboard/ Levitate, soar like eagle/This indeed is modern banking in 21st century" (Lines 12-14). The foregoing excerpt of the poem therefore paints the scenario of modern banking industry that breeds female staff as sexual tools recruited for sexual harassment and promiscuity in order to attract financial deposits and improve capitalization of the bank. The women bankers have therefore been degraded to the status of objects for sexual purpose, attractiveness or advertisement. There is complete debasement of the women bodies or parts to mere commodities, commercial products, and sexual tools. The female workers, especially the beautiful ladies are recruited as valuable assets due to their sexual appeal neglecting their competence in the banking profession. Poet-persona further notes "An industry with an insatiable appetite for deposits/Putting immense pressure on female bankers/Making them corporate prostitutes" (Lines 15-17). Here, promotion is not based on hard work, honesty and innovative ideas put into service but the emphasis is on sexual attractions. In the poem, women are reduced to sexual objects or viewed as visionless, less intelligent, incapable, weak and myopic so the only benefit of them in society is as objects for pleasure, advertisement and attraction.

Similar to the above poem is "Your thighs, your rise" which also presents female marketers who exchange their "cunts" and "thigh" for huge financial deposits in order to meet their target in the banking industry. According to the poet-persona: "Our managers desperate about deposits/ Young female marketers, veiled prostitutes/ Daily we deposit our cunts everywhere/Target before the time limit/ The prettier the better for the much dreaded"(Lines 1-5). The poet in the above excerpt reveals that though female marketers deposit their "cunts everywhere" in exchange for wealthy customers, the prettier ones attract more from depositors than those that appear ugly. Therefore, beauty is also a condition for job opportunity and promotion in modern banking. The consequence of sexual behaviour disorder is clearly stated by the poet. According to him "market your thigh, market the industry and rise/And pray that one day your thing will not leak" (Lines 6-7). The poet employs this and other thematically related poems to alleviate his bottled psychic and emotional conflicts caused by his observation of sexual behavioural patterns of modern day workers who are desperate to earn

promotion and acquire material gains to their own detriment. They are blindfolded to the consequences of their sexual promiscuous relationships in societies.

Sexuality and Bartering Practice

Sexuality in modern societies has also assumed the pattern of barter system where female characters offer sex to their male counterparts in exchange for money. Like exchange of goods and services in commerce, prostitutes present themselves as commodities made available for male consumers to purchase. In the poem titled, "Ojuelegba" the poet presents an image of prostitutes whose breasts are "Like mango rhythmically ordered by the wind" (line 6). He vividly describes the 'Ojuelegba round-about" where "Shrinks give all/Not even for a win/Breasts-see-blouse a daily creed/The eyesore and the fanciful" (Lines 1-5). This depicts subordination of women to the status of commercial products that are unpleasant to the sight. The poet-persona presents the sight of nudity particularly exposure of female breasts as displeasing and imaginatively compared them to mango fruits. This connotes "sending and receiving messages through wordless and visual medium which aid verbal language" (Unuabonah, 2010:62). In the above poem, the poet-persona further describes the body of the woman as "rotten tomatoes" that are perished, wasteful and should be discarded. He decries the present generation of women who seductively appear in public without underwear as self-objectified characters who have unconsciously reduced themselves to the status of sexual tools or commodities. They showcase themselves as essential products instead of intellectual property, innovators, inventors and producers in societies. Self-sexually commodified females divert their psychic energies to enlargement and beautification of their bodies or parts of their entire personhood. The poet laments the disgusting appearance of the woman, thus: "A woman's body rotten tomatoes/Not even with undies/Hawked from lecture halls to lecturers' offices/Either teaching and learning the approved/Or the unapproved bedmatically/No, officematically/Trade by barter the in-thing" (Lines 1-13). Research has revealed that men have more active and uncontrollable sexual drive because "men think about sex more, that is, they think about sex more frequently, have more sexual fantasies, are more often aroused, have more sexual urges, want to have sex more, masturbate more often, and report being more interested in sex" (Kathleen, *et al*., 2008:787).

The poet-persona shifts the focus of the reader from the public scene to "lecture hall" and "lecturers' offices" where women offer themselves either for lawful academic activities or hyper-sexual gratification. He employed the coinages of "bedmatically" and "officematically" to describe the sexual 'teaching-learning situation." The female students in this context regard their promiscuity or sexual activities as trade by barter, exchanging their 'in-thing" for marks in order to pass their examinations. In corroborating the foregoing, Baumeister, *et al* (2004:339) state that, "sexual activity is often regarded as among the most private of activities, negotiated by two individuals on the basis of their own individual desires and values." According to the researchers, "we place sexual negotiations in the context of a cultural system in which men and women play different roles resembling buyer and seller- in a marketplace that is ineluctably affected by the exchanges between other buyers and sellers."(339). In the above poem, therefore, lecturers, female students and their male counterparts who indulge in sexual activities are presented as buyers and sellers. Self-objectification and commodification of sexuality is perceived to be predominant in society. However, research has shown that men usually patronize the womenfolk because of their hypersexual instincts. Kathleen, *et al.* (2008:787) find that "men also desire to have more sex with numerous people more than women do, in that men desire more sexual partners, find a greater number of sexual partners more appealing, and are less successful at celibacy." The sexualization of womenfolk has adverse effects on them mentally and emotionally, influencing their behaviours in society. It devalues them to ordinary market products, selling gender, commodified object, commercial property and sexually objectified characters.

In the above poem, apart from the male lecturers who indulge in sexual acts with male students that are intelligent also have sexual relationship with the sexually objectified female students. These sexual partners, especially the female characters, appear to be suffering from nymphomania hence they are pruned to uncontrollable sexual behavior. In the poem, the poet-persona observes that; "Brilliant male students to have their altars graced/"sit in my thigh/And I by your side during examination"/ It is trade by barter/Your gifts shall make a way for you./What a world" (Lines 14-19). Baumeister, *et al* (2004:339) show that "social exchange theory analyzes interactions between two parties by examining the costs and benefits to each other. Interactions are only likely to continue if each party

gains more than it loses." The poet in the above excerpt of the poem describes the male sexual organ as 'altars" that have been "graced" by the nymphomaniac students who exchange their sexual organs as gifts just to be assisted during examinations.

Illusion and Reality of Prostitution

The lifestyle of sexually objectified women is ignoble, deceptive and regrettable. Such women may live flamboyantly throughout their period of sexual bartering or commercialization. Clement Idegwu portrays through his poetic genre that sexually objectified female characters are often disillusioned and slide into emotional depression in the end. The poet captures this in "call girl?" where he paints prostitution as dreadful, bleak and destructive. According to the poet-persona, sexual addicts should quit prostitution because of the danger involved: "Lived the world of prostitution/Worse than a bottomless pit/Water as bleak as the darkest of nights/No one goes into prostitution and remained unharmed"(Lines 1-5). The above extract paints the picture of a horrible 'bottomless pit" and dark water as "the darkest of nights." The poet also describes the lifestyle of prostitutes as the world of destruction. He notes that prostitution is characterized by shattered dreams, starvation, and inflation or, unrequited love. The sex-workers are regarded as "cargoes" or cheap commodities that are often "used and resold at will" by pimps and traffickers. Scholars have acknowledged the economic principles which suggest that "the price of sex will depend on supply and demand, competition among sellers, variations in product, collusion among sellers, and other factors" (Baumeister, *et al*, 2004:339). The sexually commodified women's bodies or parts trigger negative thoughts and feelings in them.

In the poem, "Digging deep" the poet psychologically reflected on the horrible experience of a hypersexual female addict who was mercilessly abused sexually by numerous male drug addicts. According to the female objectified nymph and poet-speaker: "My chest-big boobs flat as slippers/Covered with cigarette burns/Exhausted having a minimum of twelve men/Twenty drug addicts digging deep into my scripture/Tired, acted sick and had my chest turned astray"(Lines 1-5). The poet-persona describes the once "big boobs" of the nymph being reduced to flat "slippers" and eventually exhausted by the "twenty drug addicts digging

deep" into her sex organ or genitalia. The victim of the sexual abuse got respites when "acted sick" and unmotivated or sexually inactive.

The speaker, in the above poem, reports that she was a victim of human trafficking who was tricked overseas for greener pastures but ended up prostitution. Though she acquired enough wealth, she has become "waste product", mercilessly bastardized by drug addicts hence she recounts further: "Favoured, I would have been feed to the fishes/ Nne, never fall for these oversee tricks/Whether by your pastors or loved ones/Withered in my prime/My soul wrecked and interred/Am a walking corpse" (Lines 6-11). Clement Idegwu presents a victim whose entire world has been devastated despite the material acquisition in her ignoble "career". The testimony of the character-victim reveals her "buildings" and "cars" as inconsequential compares to sound health and feelings of happiness, self-esteem and fulfilment in human existence. These assertions are presented in the lines: "Those buildings and cars house skeletons/I am a skeleton, a waste product/Those flats of mine there/There on that street house a skeleton/I am a skeleton, a waste product"(Lines 12-16). In relation to the poem, the morality principle allows the speaker's "libidinal drive to prevail. The libido is the main component of the id which is the basic instinct of human beings and drives them to pursue happiness especially sexual pleasure"(Xiong, 2018:93).

Cancerous Prevention and Sexualization

Clement Idegwu has demonstrated that individuals can promote moral eminence against aberrational behaviour through poetry in society. The instinctual drives of the objectified women in contemporary society is shown uncontrollably at any slight opportunity. In "No bra day", the poet decries the abuse of the "braless day" declared for all women globally for the prevention of breast cancer. While some women understand the purpose of this programme, others misconstrue it to walking nudes exposing their breasts and thighs in public places. The poet observes that: "They walk the streets on a braless day/All those sloppy things wrapped in a scarf/Their twin towers Alaba market channel/A turn in anger" (lines 1-4). He describes women who are unkempt in "chaotic and confusing" manner while traders are vividly captured with their "Loads of legs and vegetation left to fallow/A mumbled mangrove forest and jumbled lean thighs/chaotic and confusing/what good is messy and frumpy articles of trade/A wacky rolling train

wreck in twenty-first century Nigeria" (Lines 5-9). The poet portrays a mental picture of a character and scenario that is irritating and degrading. African societies are governed by norms, ethical standards and values, and individuals are expected to conform to them. Though western influences are advantageous in diverse ways, there is the utmost need for censorship of imported practices that can undermine the moral standards internalized for positive thinking and good conduct.

Conclusion

The paper explored sexual commodification and bartering system that are overwhelming lifestyles of female gender in the banking industry, educational and religious institutions, to mention a few, in the past decades. Employers of labour recruit young women who are expected to seductively attract customers to the companies and increase their capital base. Clement Idegwu's poetry collection exposes these and other immoral activities, likened to commercialization of sex for promotion and realization of financial targets for job security. The chosen poems which were critically examined in this study include "Endangered species", "Your thigh, your rise", "Ojuelegba", "Call girl", "Digging deep" and "No bra day." The thematic thrusts of sexual objectification and bartering system among female gender explored to activate the psychological consciousness of readers about the consequences of these morally bankrupt acts in globalized society.

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