

Proceedings of the one-day workshop on
**'THE BODY IN THE ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL
PRODUCTIONS: BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND
SIGNIFICATION'**



Actes de la journée d'études et de réflexions sur
**'LE CORPS DANS LES PRODUCTIONS ARTISTIQUES ET
CULTURELLES : ENTRE ESTHÉTIQUE ET
SIGNIFICATION'**

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Klohinlwélé KONÉ

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THE FEMALE BODY AS THE TOPOS OF PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION IN “SKINNED”, A SHORT STORY BY NNEKA LESLEY ARIMAH

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This paper discusses the complexities of the discourse of social equality between man and woman in a changing Igbo community in “Skinned” a short story by Nigerian writer Lesley Nneka Arimah. Through a feminist approach, we aim at exploring the paradigm of “clothed” and “unclothed” women precisely identified as conventional and unconventional; more clearly married and unmarried women. The “clothed” and “unclothed” statuses and divide construct here the metaphor of the female body as a site where male and patriarchal ideology and practice against the full and free expression of the female self. The story revolves around the female body through the nudity of Ejem, the protagonist who will attempts to revert the laws, to lead a social disruptive life. Yet, Ejem inability to marry (unclothed) from the beginning to the end, leaves her uncovered, showing how the patriarchal system is deeply entrenched in the psyche of all, male female. The male gaze at the female body reinforces the ideology of a male dominated society in which Ejem emerge as a marginal character. Affirming sexual autonomy in a social system in which society is organized around male authority figures is quite challenging. On one hand, Arimah is signifying upon the sexual objectification of women and on the other hand she is raising the issue of discrimination of the Osu caste system in Igbo tradition.

Keywords: Clothed, unclothed, female, body, patriarchy

Ce travail s’articule autour des complexités du discours de l’égalité sociale entre l’homme et la femme dans une société igbo du Nigéria en pleine mutation dans l’œuvre de Lesley Nneka Arimah. Il met l’accent sur les subtilités de la question de genre d’une part dans une communauté igbo et d’autre part dans les sociétés de caste en général à travers le paradigme de « Couverte » et « non-couverte » des femmes, identifiés comme étant

des femmes « conventionnelles » et « non conventionnelles » et plus précisément des femmes « mariées » ou « non mariées ». L'œuvre problématise la question du corps de la femme comme un enjeu d'oppression dans la société. En effet, le regard que la société porte sur une femme mariée est différent de celui d'une femme non-mariée ; ce qui crée ainsi une disparité dans le traitement de la femme qu'elle soit mariée ou pas. La décision du protagoniste Ejem de ne pas se marier met en crise les valeurs de la tradition ce qui lui confère une vie perturbée. Son incapacité à se marier « non-couverte » fait d'elle une femme « nue ». Le regard de l'homme du corps féminin renforce cette idéologie de la domination masculine dans une société où Ejem émerge comme un personnage marginal. Affirmer son autonomie sexuelle dans une société centrée sur l'autorité masculine est une mise en crise. D'une part Arimah insinue l'objectification sexuelle de la femme d'une part et, d'autre part, dénonce le sort du système de caste des « osu » dans la tradition igbo.

Mots-clés : « Couverte », « non-couverte », femme, corps, patriarcat

Introduction

Through the paradigm of clothed (married) and unclothed (unmarried) women, the UK-based Nigerian writer Lesley Nneka Arimah ponders on the issue of marriage in a patriarchal culture. The author also seeks to problematize the place of pride allocated to the idea of male/female companionship and the extreme importance thereof in African society (whether traditional or modern) in general, and particularly in Nigeria's Igbo society.

Arimah uses nakedness as her *tópos koinós* (the commonplace, the seat or the line of argument) to not only show how and why the female body is captivating, eye-catching in the sense that when it is uncovered it instigates countless comments, whether positive or snide. But also, nakedness is mirrored as a site of freedom, or agency and voicedness in a society where womanhood tends to be reduced to the only gender roles devised and substantiated by men who happen to be the conflict-ridden counterpart of the women portrayed, signified and sometimes, negativized. In this work resounding as a grueling attempt to assail patriarchy and the use of the married status in Igbo society, "to be clothed or not to be clothed?" is the question to grapple with. In "Skinned", the fact of refusing to marry, to get claimed by a man, thereby pleasing the expectations of society where being unmarried, is synonymous with unnaturalness, ought to be read, more often than not, as an act of courage and a call to defy the prevailing patriarchal system.

This study seeks to show how the female body is used by feminist discourse in order to deal patriarchy in Igbo culture in particular and in African society at large a deadly blow in order to make the position of women better. In fact, the female body is appropriated by men in order to make show of their power on the member of this gender in a world where rules and norms are set by men. Here, sex and gender are used here the same way. In her book, *Blind to Sameness: Sexpectations and the Social Construction of Male and Female Bodies*, Asia Friedman asserts, “I use the term *gender* when referring to normative cultural discourses about maleness/masculinity and femaleness/femininity, and the term *sex* when discussing bodily differences” (A. Friedman, 2014, p. 3).

First, the paper shows the intricate relations between sex and the attending gendered roles imposed on women in the Igbo society fictionalized by Nneka Lesley Arimah, and how a naked woman (her sex or private parts – genitals and breasts – are exposed by a rigid male-organized society), with all the sensory and emotional implications of such a posture, becomes invisible. It also shows how such a debased woman regains some form of visibility in an attempt to reassert herself over and against the strictures and hurdles. This gait sets on her way by the caste-like system belaboring to pin her down until she complies with the gender roles set by society, and more specifically, men. In other words, this study seeks to demonstrate how the body of a naked women views as a site of her own oppression by traditions operationalized by both men and women in Igbo society.

I. Representing nakedness

The gist of the story in Arimah’s “Skinned” is the usual binary opposition between male and female in a world that is not ready to jettison machoism, sexism, and gender role divisions offering the benefits to the only men and putting women at the lower end of the ladder of social consideration and respect. This story of female oppression-based categorization is about a 30-something year-old woman Ejem living in the West and who, due to the conventionalities of her traditional Igbo customs, is supposed or under the obligation to remain bare naked until she gets claimed by a man whom she will call her husband. Ejem, from age 16 to 30 is unclothed, both publicly and in private. Though at the beginning she is accommodated, her employability becomes very difficult as hovers from job to job only to end up jobless altogether. Ejem’s joblessness is consequence of her status of unclothedness and her being unclaimed. This state of affairs is explicative of Ejem’s society being

fundamentally patriarchal. In fact, here gender roles and (social and political) acceptance is predicated on marital status. An unmarried woman like Ejem who has to go naked with only a box covering her privates down below, becomes invisible in a society yet focalized on female sensual body parts. This invisibility is the burden of the unmarried woman in an (oppressive) environment defining social worth, dignity and existential weight by the measure of the idioms of manhood. It ought to be added that to be married or not to be married is not the question. Either one is married (this is valid for both male and female in some African settings) or one is a de facto outcast with all sorts of social narratives associated with this status. Etymologically, marriage comes from the French language word “mari” (husband as a male companion) who has to couple with a woman with the expectation that offspring will be yielded in order to found a small community cell called the family. Of course, this conception of marriage is heterosexual and largely patriarchal. Can

“this conception of marriage is heterosexual and largely patriarchal.”

marriage be appropriate for the feminist agenda and be similarly an exercise into debunking gender role construction and disparities? In fact, being single, remaining unmarried and working towards remaining so in a society where status and honorability are bestowed by marriage must be read as a

struggle to make things better for women who are basically thingified by the male-dominated and patriarchal system of social management.

The story ends with an Ejem who, though seeking to comply with the social expectations of her society, meets women like her. To be in an environment with like-minded people and those persons with whom one shares the same condition makes life bearable. The protagonist meets with a female trio with different characteristics and life perceptions. She finally decides to revert the tables of laws by dressing (up) though she is not married as per the traditions of her community. This story is symbol-packed and ideologically-loaded in the sense that the author builds her story on the sense of possibility and some form of existentialist approach to life when one lives in an adverse environment. Ejem undoes the strictures of her outcastdom” and reinvests the society that initially cast her away. This form of freedom definitely nullifies the negativizing logics set in motion by a social order that is male, paternalistic and patriarchal.

As can be seen, this story is literally one of human nudity and how the latter is approached and appropriated ideologically by human beings in general and African people in particular, and most specifically in this work’s

fictionalized Igbo culture. Nudity dates back to the beginning of the human species. The first human being is shown as one that did not fancy about the fashionable features and import that we now accord to clothing. Of course, at one point of the process of relative evolution, because the humans were growing more conscious of their private parts and the unease issuing from this, they started covering. The same view is held by the Abrahamic religions connecting the descent of Eve and Adam to their being conscious of their own nudity and the implications of the latter. In precolonial Africa, or the time prior to some Africans' interactions with the outside world (Arabs and Westerners), being unclothed or naked was rather the rule than an exception. The oversexualization of the human gaze and the extreme eroticization of reproductive organs makes nudity a source of uproar. Nudity is now the exception to the rules. One has to be crazy or savage to go naked while others are clothed. Why does a female author from Africa, and especially in a culture where clothing is cherished, use the trope of nakedness, unclothedness, and "literarize" it?¹ Why does Arimah, an Igbo woman, portray the predicament of women in general, and the African woman in particular, in a way bordering with an exercise into voyeurism, which is more of Western "quality" than something African?

Far from essentializing and romanticizing Africa, the precolonial African did not bother to go naked and it was no one else's business in the first place. For example, the Kambari tribe is a naked and hill-dwelling community in the Alantika Mountains that span the border between the south east of Yola, capital of Nigeria's Adamawa State, and Northern Cameroon. These people "practice nudity as a major part of their culture and only cover the bottom half of their bodies with wrappers when they have to go sell their farm produce (corn, millet, peanuts, beans, and rice) at the market" writes I. Udodiong in her article, "Meet the Naked Tribes of Nigeria – Where People Wear Leaves and Little to Nothing." Udodiong reports that the chief of these people (Maiunguwa) confided that "Moving around naked or half-naked is our culture and we don't care what people say about us, [...] we are comfortable that way because we find it normal. What attracts men is not nudity. Our men are attracted by how women plait their hair, good manners and the tattoos the young ladies have. Western civilisation is another man's culture. Why must we embrace it, leaving our own that was handed over to us by our forefathers?"²

¹ Speaking about the same focus on the female body, but here in the US, Caroline Brown writes, "That which defined what an American citizen most emphatically was not, the black body, and certainly the black female body, a site of ever-multiplying negations, has been recuperated by contemporary women artists and writers in dazzlingly innovative and often beautifully unexpected ways" (2012, p. 4).

² See I. Udodiong's "Meet the naked tribes of Nigeria — where people wear leaves and little to nothing" *Pulse.ng*. (October 21, 2019).

Speaking of nudity in African art and Yoruba ones in particular, Moyo Okedjii of Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria is of the opinion that “Nude figures are treated in a decorative style that seems to reduce the emphasis on their nakedness. This is a very clever way of presenting nude figures without undue offense. Pornography shows that it is quite possible to portray nude figures with sadistic intentions to hurt or brutalize the mind. A sensitive expression of the nude is not enough for pornographers. They are usually multinational media tycoons who set up their sex-shops simply to riches. They trade on human emotional and spiritual senses, through the physical medium of nude figures. These pornographers have proved that the nude can be used to captivate the human physical and spiritual senses. Yet the depiction of nudes by some contemporary Yoruba artists is not necessarily inspired by foreign or pornographic ‘contamination.’ However, many modern Nigerian artists are rather hesitant to explore nude themes, as a recoil from pornography, or a refusal to imbibe foreign tastes. Hardly can one think of a nude masterpiece in contemporary Nigerian art” (M. Okediji, 1991, pp. 30-31). One may then prompt questions like “what actual nudity has got to do with nudity in art?” One answer is that they have everything to do with one another. In fact, art in every society is the (carbon) copy showing grossly or in minute details the life experience of the people. Thus, when nudity, as a matter of natural and normal appearance in traditional Africa and among those Africans not keen on abandoning some superannuated practices of theirs, is represented, it is a work of art speaking about and for the people presentifying their life through art. So much the first humans (cavemen as some called them) represented their experience with drawing in rocks, so too some Africans decided to represent their natural appearance. In other words, the role of art is to bear witness to our existence. Art is thus the testimony of our lived experience because it records our worldviews and subjectivities with regard to what we see here and now, and from our own angle of perception. Art is customized. This is exactly the point Chinua Achebe tried to make in the 1970’s as part of his reflection on the African art and the role of the intellectual in his Africa in budding move from traditionality to Western modernity. “The making of art is not the exclusive concern of a particular caste or secret society. [...] *There is no rigid barrier between the makers of culture and its consumers. Art belongs to all and is ‘function’ of society*” (C. Achebe, 1976, p. 29; italics in original).

The representation of nudity by Lesley Arimah partakes of the attempt of the artist to say something heavy on her heart: the voicelens, invisibility

and negativization³ of those women who refuse or unable to get in some marital relationship in strongly African-customed communities.

2. Male gaze: perceptions of the female body

2.1. In Africa

The human body is, for obvious reasons, the site of the power of the owner of the said body. The body is the power of its owner. It is also home to the mind and spirit, which are “essences” particularizing individuals in society. The two immaterial elements cannot exist without the body even though one has such phrases as “body and mind”. This is a “spiritual and/or immaterial conception of the human whole or body. Also, this is the sense of the biblical reference to the body. In fact, the Bible says that one’s body is one’s temple. In fact, I Corinthians 6:19-20 read: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So, glorify God in your body.” Though some exegetes believe that the context of this astounding assertion pertains to the avoidance of sexual immorality, another possible interpretation is that one has the responsibility to hold one’s body and whatever expresses its exteriority in good shape and healthy condition. Here, external presentation of the body is of primal importance. The body is also, and more importantly so, physical. It is what the naked eye perceives, attempts to understand and read it somehow as a text of sorts. In this sense, the male body or the female body has some specific meanings both for the perceiver or the gazer and for the owner of the body itself. For some reasons, the owner of the body tends, sometimes, to fashion out the body in accordance with the taste of the outer world, with those who perceive the body.

The female body, from times immemorial, has been an object of fascination and a subject of a great deal of talks both among men and women. The magic operated by the female body in particular makes it a slate on which social and political texts by others are written. It is an agenda board of sorts.

“The magic operated by the female body in particular makes it a slate on which social and political texts by others are written.”

³ This word has to be understood in the sense ascribed by postcolonial theorists to “nothingization” (borrowed from Negritude’s Aimé Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism*) even though the word is rather used in medical English to mean the process by which a seropositive person becomes seronegative and in mathematics to account for positive numbers whose value is made negative.

From fashion models to women in the house (wives), the shape of the body and consciousness thereof has been influenced. Whether outside or inside Africa, the female body has been a source of fixation. The appeal exerted by the body, made it be covered around the world. The female body has been read as a text with a great deal of meaning and interests. Every part of this body, because of its shape different from a man's, has been ascribed some meaning and has been seen as a source of arousal. Of course, this makes some theorists, feminists for that matter, very uncomfortable and irritated. This is very clear in feminist theories of the late 20th century and very prominent in the current century.

In some communities in Africa, the female body is culturally exposed, and proudly so. This exposure predicates on the exigencies of species coupling, building and furthering the community. For that matter, the body of the young or budding girl (from the breasts to the navel, and sometimes the buttocks as well) is exposed to show the beauty radiating from it, thereby preparing her for adult life through marriage. For instance, in Northern Côte d'Ivoire where Islam made important inroads, on 14th and 27th days of the holy month of Ramadan, marriageable girls used to go almost naked – they only wear some loincloth and have some perfumes on two strings across their chest while their breasts are exposed as if to invite potential suitors after the month. The dance where the young girls shake their body and whirl horse tails around following the beating of drums is called Krubi. Clearly, during such a month, such exposure, in orthodox or radical Muslim traditions outside Africa cannot be imagined. One cannot but ask: What became the fate of the nudes or bare breasts after Wahabi orthodox version of Islam has almost taken hold of Muslim communities in West Africa, especially in the huge urban areas?

Conversely, in non-Muslim or Westernized Africa, the female body has almost always been exposed as mentioned above. This explains sometimes the voyeuristic gaze of outside ethnologists in those places where only the private parts of the female body are covered. The bottom line here is that the perception of the female body responds to the gender role divisions in human life. As much the male body is construed as being the site of physical prowess and power, so too the female body is seen as a source of appeal whereby the male seeks to address some instinctual drives like sex. The female body is seen as a sexual exutory, therefore taken as an object to be used at the male's will. Likewise, because of the specifics of this body, it is said to not be able to attend the efforts consented by the male. Thus, in the French language the woman is called the "weaker sex".

2.2. Gazes at the Igbo Female Body

In almost all societies, the female body has been, if it still being, used as a marker of social differentiation and stratification. In traditional African settings in general, the woman was classed as second to the man, as if building on the Biblical teachings where the female is said to have proceeded from a man or Quranic understanding of gender strata whereby the man has to be seen literally and metaphorically on top of the woman. In Igbo society, the story (at least based on Arimah's "Skinned") is not different. The story posits two kinds of womanhood: on the one hand, there is the woman who is married (or husbanded), socially respected for that reason, and the woman who is not married, either by choice or because she simply could not afford a husband to claim her as a wife.

As per gender role divisions, it is clear that the man is the center of the world and the woman shows at the margin. In order to illustrate this, delving into the Igbo world through Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* will prove absolutely useful. In fact, the writer who first brought Igbo traditional lifestyle to us shows that females are springboards for the operationalization and realization of male's worldviews and agenda. For one, they are supposed to hold their peace when men have the floor. Achebe shows this better in *Things Fall Apart* where at a meeting Okonkwo and other men are meeting. A man without title, therefore equated with a woman, attempts to take the floor. Okonkwo calls him to order. The story goes like this "Only a week ago a man had contradicted him at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said: 'This is for men'. The man who contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman" (C. Achebe, 1994, p. 26). Likewise, we recall Okonkwo reprimanding one of his wives that looks like questioning the normal order of gender roles in the village by asking interminable questions to her husband. He calls her to order, and very dryly so (thundering and stammering): "Do what you are told, woman, [...] When did you become one of the Ndichie of Umuofia?" (*Ibid.*, p. 14) This speaks to the rigid gender role division. Power, physical or political, lies with the only men who set the boundaries of the spatial and temporal possibilities of women. Clearly, women's place is the kitchen: making food, attending the male's bodily/corporeal needs. We see here that men do the cultivating and the cooking is done by their wives.

As well, there is the physical importance of women here. In fact, whether in Africa or in most societies, women are a valve for the expression and satisfaction of male sexual urges. They help satisfy men's sexual drives. In

“Skinned”, the female body is perceived as a springboard whereby the male bodily needs are catered to. For instance, the reader can see some young males on the bus who gaze at Ejem’s naked body and wonder why she is not claimed. Yet, beyond this supposed surprise there is the question of male voyeurism. The men are also lusting for Ejem. Thus, she covers her front with a cultural box for that matter and extirpates herself from these exploring and inquisitive male eyes. The same gaze follows Ejem when she befriends Odinaka, the unclaimed but physically clothed woman. The man who is seemingly the companion of Ejem’s new mentor/ benefactor tries to woo her despite being in a relationship with the rich woman. The man looks here for another woman to bed, as if to add to the long list of the women he had commerce with. This simply speaks to the fact that women are taken at face value; they are just prizes to collect and to brag about in male assemblies where suchlike stories are told.

Why do things happen that way? In her preface to a collection to women’s short story Y. Vera (1999, Preface, p. 1) seems to have some answer. It is a matter of construct of authority put together by men. She writes, “[...] birth becomes an aberration that comments on the ruthless circumstance of a female agony occurring in a stultifying, thoroughly confusing construct of authority”. This state of things needs to be debunked, deconstructed, just like Arimah does in “Skinned”. Thus, one clearly understands a bold claim as the one made by Yvonne Vera when she writes, “A woman writer must have an imagination that is plain stubborn, that can invent new gods and banish ineffectual ones” (*Ibid.*). This is some sort of voice-claiming whereby the artist speaks up and for his kindred that is usually spoken for, or simply silenced. Here, one can draw on Peter Hitchcock’s notion of the “dialogics of the oppressed” or the Spivakian question as to if the subaltern can speak.⁴ Hitchcock’s “dialogics of the oppressed describe a dissenter and aims to decenter” (P. Hitchcock, 1993, p. 1).⁵ In either case, the muted voice is given full expressiveness and agency.

⁴ About this imperative of making sure, Spivak writes, “In so fraught a field, it is not easy to ask the question of the consciousness of the subaltern woman; it is thus all the more necessary to remind pragmatic radicals that such a question is not an idealist red herring” (G. Spivak, 2010, p. 297).

⁵ Hitchcock’s notion of dialogics bases on Bakhtin’s formulation of multivoicedness in literature. Here, Hitchcock turns it into a space of many voicedness which clearly transpires in these words of his: “Rather than homogenize the oppressed, dialogism throws into sharp relief their heterogeneity, but it also explores the interrelation of different forms of oppression that may determine what may seem a ‘single’ subjectivity” (P. Hitchcock, 1999, p. 1).

3. Unclothedness of the marker of male patriarchal genderization of social roles

Lesley Arimah's short story is one of a peculiar nature. It speaks about and for world women in general, and African women in particular who are held in a position docile and subservient housewives who approximate the condition of beasts of burden.

The unclothed woman in "Skinned" is the lot of the metaphor of the millions of women that are ostracized, rendered "untouchable" *à la* "dalit" (Inida) or "osu" (Igbo) just because they fail or refuse to pair up with some

men to call their husband. Just like a naked person wandering the street, who people gaze at with relish and pretend to look away (to distance both physically and morally from), the naked, unclothed, unclaimed (unmarried) woman is seen with awe, added

"The female breasts have received more erotic attention from males than any other part of the body."

to the shame she feels when devoured by voyeuristic gaze and appetite of males. For example, on the bus, after breaking friendship with Chidinma, whose husband stared at "the brown discs of her areolae, the cropped design of hair between her legs, whatever parts of her went unhidden in her seated position" (p. 3), Ejem is not offered a ride back home. The author describes the scene with a rather creative simpleness. "Ejem positioned her box to better cover her breasts and walked to the bus stop. [...] Ejem hated public transportation – the staring as she lay the absorbent little towel square on her seat, the paranoia of imagining every other second what to do if her menstrual cup leaked" (p. 6). Like Chance, Chidinma's husband who is rather a voyeur, there are those other males who stare. A group of young males at the bus stop seek to explore her nakedness:

"How old you think she is?

.....

Dude, old"

"I don't know, man. Let's see her breasts. She should put that box down. That's why she's unclaimed, rudeness. Who's gonna want to claim that?" (p. 5)

As what the young men do, Ejem is "explored", "inspected by men" when she gives a PowerPoint presentation all naked. All attention is drawn on the breasts. According to D. Morris (2005, p 142) "The female breasts have received more erotic attention from males than any other part of the body. Focusing such attention directly on the genitals is too extreme; on other parts of the anatomy

not extreme enough. The breasts are the perfect happy medium – a taboo zone, but one that is not too shocking”. At this point of (hu-)woman evolution, men cannot take their eyes off this part of the female body.

Thus, Ejem offers herself, in spite of herself again, to a show. This part of the story thus unravels:

As usual, she was the only woman in the room. The client paid no attention to her PowerPoint, focusing on what is considered to be the impropriety of an unclaimed woman distracting from business matters. Ejem was used to this and tried to steer the conversation back to the budget. When the man ignored her, none of her coworkers bothered to censure him. [...] She walked out of the room.⁶ (p. 8)

Yet, the victim of the male-dominated system is the one to be reprimanded by the Human Resources manager, a covered/claimed woman in her fifties who would say: “You can’t seriously expect a group of men to pay attention to pie charts or whatever when there is an available woman in the room. Maybe, if you were covered this wouldn’t happen. Until you are, we can no longer put you in front of clients” (p. 8).

Clearly, the HR manager and these males read her body like a text: society has certain expectations for this woman and her failure to fit in these creates tension and frictions. To be unclothed/unmarried is a social disease here. The young men believe that if she is unclothed, it is because she is “old”, “rude” and unwilling to get married as well. Yet, Arimah gives less clues, minor indication as to whether or not Ejem seeks to get “claimed” by a man. We know that “A part of Ejem had always believed that they’d be claimed at the same time, but then Chidinma had secured a wife-cloth at twenty [...]” (p. 7), which somehow renders the story unseemly and unbelievable. Is she to be blamed for her fate/man-made situation? In West Africa, if the story unravels in Arimah’s native Nigeria, all heterosexual women tend to be engaged in marital companionship. From the pain Ejem experiences, it is clear that she longs for marriage which marks, not only the peak that a woman in her society should reach, but it is also a way to get social protection from the vampirizing male voyeurs.

⁶ In *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong*, a book edited by Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, Beverly Guy-Sheftall writes that “Being Black and female is characterized by the private being made public which subverts conventional notions about the need to hide and render invisible women’s sexuality and private parts. There is nothing sacred about Black women’s bodies, in other words. They are not off-limits, untouchable, or unseeable” (Guy-Sheftall, p. 18).

As much nakedness is supposed to make visible by rendering the subject eye-catching, so too being covered draws attention to the woman.⁷ Socially, when a woman covers her privates (being covered by way of being claimed) acquires high regard, respect and visibility. The cloth is a central definer of this story, which revolves around a thesis (clothedness / coveredness) and its antithesis (unclothedness / nakedness). The binary opposition between nakedness and coveredness is the paradigm whereby Ejem and the unmarried women are judged in African traditional cultures. This paradigm resists the test of modernism. For example, human life is of extreme importance in modern society. When there is fire and people die, everybody show pity. In “Skinned” it is all the contrary. In fact, when fire erupts in a building and chars three “uncovered”/ unmarried women working at a cloth-making factory, the local TV relays the news with such a way that refrigerates the blood in the vein. The woman reporting the news says that

The building was rumored to be a haven of sorts for unclaimed women, who lived there, evading their responsibilities as cloth makers. *Authorities halted firefighters from putting out the blaze, hoping to encourage those lost women to return to proper life.* At least three bodies were discovered in the ashes. Their identities have yet to be confirmed. (p. 9; our italics)

What is more, the mayor of the town shows no sympathy. He rather blames the victims and rather preoccupied with salvaging the honor of his town saying “This is a decent town with decent people. If folks want to walk around uncovered and unclaimed, they need to go somewhere else. I am sorry about the property loss and the people who couldn’t get out, but this is a family town” (p. 9).

Symbolically and materially, the cloth represents a shield and confers social and political visibility because it is the life-changer, the transformer. On the symbolic plane, the cloth in African traditional setting for a girl means a rite of passage from girlhood to adulthood. In Arimah’s story, it belongs to the girl to create the condition for her own coveredness. The thing here is that she will, much sooner than fifteen years of age, be denied the patriarchal protection of the father and the clan. In fact, “[...] at fifteen, her mother had come to her

⁷ Desmond Morris says something along the same lines. He writes, “As a source of great sexual pleasure the genitals should be celebrated and yet they are rarely mentioned in polite society. [...] The loincloth had three advantages. It not only reduced the strength of the sexual display of its owner when he or she was in a non-sexual public context, but it also intensified the sexuality of the private moments when it was removed. Thirdly, it helped to protect the delicate genital region from the harsher surfaces of the natural environment” (D. Morris, 2005, p. 203).

bedroom and, stroking her hair, told Ejem that it was time to remove her cloth. [...] The day Ejem was disrobed was also the day her father stopped interacting with her, avoiding the impropriety of a grown man talking to a naked girl” (p. 7). Before reaching marriageable age, the girl has security, confidence, and paternal love and protection, and visibility. Age decides when these have to fade away. The father cannot help it because any opposition to disrobing the daughter (i.e., her socialization through wifedom and womanhood) reads as the rebelliousness of the father. The customs demand the removal of the “father-cloth” (unmarriageable status) after a certain age and on behalf of “wife-cloth” (marriage). The girl has to become a woman.⁸ The textile typology delineates the passage from girlhood to womanhood. On the material plane, conversely, the cloth makes a grown woman visible. The visibility here conjugates in terms of protection from male voyeuristic gaze and sexual predation, and in terms of acceptance of her by other women (covered and uncovered) and the society at large. The transformed female gains a higher ranking and status because the garb of social worth and dignity now covers and protects her. As said earlier, being unmarried and condemned to nakedness raises the level of other female’s condescendence, annoyance and undignified feeling as well as men’s lust because they cheaply see what is supposed to be forbidden fruits. There lies the difference between Ejem, her new unmarried and undignified friends (Odinanka, Doreen, Dalilah and the polite but distant trio formed by Morayo, Mukaso, and Maryam) and Chidinma who parts with her on accounts of “treason”. Chidinma fears that the nakedness of Ejem will get her marriage and protection disintegrated. Her husband, as any heterosexual male, preyed on Ejem’s nudity.

Unclothedness is then a source of heightened tension, annoyance and predatory victimhood. Ejem and her kindred friends are scorned. One can see this patronizing and condescending tension when Ejem touts before the married women the benefits of the beauty products she sells at Chidinma’s where some women meet. To the women present, Ejem emphasizes the

⁸ This is a problem in every society to deal with. The woman has the reproductive organ to ensure the continuity of the human race, and everything is done to make her do her part, sometimes over and against her will. The morphing from girlhood to womanhood is best explained by King in her book on Hippocratic gynecology. She writes that “A major concern of Hippocratic gynaecology is the transformation of immature girls into reproductive women; in Greek terms, making a *parthenos*, a girl who combines the features of being ‘childless, unmarried, yet of the age for marriage’ linked on the epitaph of Philostrata [...] into a *gynê*. To be classified as a mature woman, a *gynê*, it was necessary to have given birth: the birth of the first baby ends the process of becoming a woman which started with the first menstrual period demonstrating the readiness of the body, in terms both of the availability of blood from which a foetus can be formed, and the possibility of male semen gaining entry to the womb” (King, p. 23).

imperative for one woman to take good and extreme care of her skin: “a woman’s skin is her most important feature and she has to take care of it like a treasured accessory” (p. 2). The married and covered women dare not address her because “They stopped speaking directly to Ejem and began to treat her as if she were a woman of the Osu caste. [...] Ejem was beneath them” (p. 2). Instead, they “tittered and smoothed their tastefully patterned wife-cloth over their limbs. They wore them simply, draped and belted into long, graceful dresses, allowing the fabric to speak for itself” (p. 2). T. Lomax describes the effect of the dress in society in her book, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture*, saying that “Dress functions as a kind of meta-language, succeeding and transcending verbal forms of communication, in which clean, modest attire can function as a smile, and the simplicity of a gown corresponds to the wearer’s simplicity of heart and mind” (T. Lomax, 2018, Introduction, p. 13).

Yet, beyond the fashionable, there is the fact that being clothed is literally is a protection those eyes preying on the nakedness of the woman in a “normal” setting as well as in a culture like Ejem’s. Inability to secure a husband places the woman at the lower end of social consideration. For instance, even though Odinaka inherits the business of her father with the riches implied and even though she self-clothes (wear fabric over and against the customs), she does not secure the respect and social status conferred by marriage. She opines that “When you have as much money as I do, you exist above every law. [...]” (p. 14). In her heart of hearts, she is untrue and unfair to herself. In actual facts, she lives in opulence but the inner joy of a married woman she does not have. She wishes she were married, thus she says “I imagine creating a world [...] where disrobing is something a woman does only by choice” (p. 14). Yet, the male-dominated world of theirs makes it impossible. One understands why Doreen “eschewed the option to self-clothe” despite the wherewithal available to her, and resigns claiming:

Let them stare [...] This body is a work of art. [...] Look, we have to live with this. I was disrobed at age ten. Do you know what it feels like to be exposed so young? I hid for almost a decade before I found myself, my pride. No one will ever again make me feel uncomfortable about my skin. I plan to remain unclaimed and uncovered for as long as I live, and no one can say a damn thing about. Odinaka rebels in her own way, and I in mine. I don’t yearn for the safety of cloth. If the law requires me to be naked, I will be naked. And I will be goddamned if they make me feel uncomfortable for their law. (p. 13)

When Ejem self-clothes, instead of this consolidating the friendship with Chidinma, things get even rougher. Chidinma is all smile when she sees her friend putatively reaching her own status: “You’re covered! You’re claimed! Turn around; let me see. Your wife-cloth is so fine. I am upset you didn’t invite me to the claiming ceremony. [...] You must be very happy with your husband” and Ejem opposes with clarification: “There wasn’t a ceremony. There was nothing to invite you to. [...] It’s self-cloth. I covered myself”. Thusly, the old friend is estranged because Ejem is usurping a title she does not deserve. Acting like a cog of the masculinist power machine of female oppression, and as if talking also to Odinaka the “independently wealthy woman who flouted convention without consequences” (p. 11), thus killing two birds with one stone, she unabashedly speaks back: “A self-cloth, is it? Someone from a good family like yours? I don’t believe it. [...] You think that you are covered, but you are still naked. No amount of expensive ‘self-cloth’ [...] will change that” (p. 20). As well, that’s why at first, Ejem is reluctant to do what is customarily wrong: “Covering myself would be illegal” (p. 12). The unclothedness/clothedness paradigm and the ensuing implications for the two friends now apart, the refusal of Doreen to dress, all show that the psychological mark of patriarchal working on women’s mind is effective. That Chidinma is awed by Ejem’s self-clothing is the illustration of the deeply-rooted acceptance of this social stratification in female cultural and social worth against the backdrop of male validation.

Unclothedness status and the rigid law buttressing it makes it comparable to the condition of the casted people also rubbing elbows with the unmarried on the bus and at Odinaka. One understands why the gentleman seeking to marry the rich lady is unhappy; instead to opening up to his advances, Odinaka is “busy collecting debris”, i.e., accommodating the dregs of society known as the Osu. This casted people work for the rich woman and serve the “uncovered” as well. One can reasonably understand why the image of the Osu follows Ejem throughout the story.

4. The thin line between the Osu and unclothed women

Let’s make it clear: Osu women are no different from the unclaimed women who are pitifully ostracized and otherized by the patriarchal system aided by some other women who take pride in being wife-clothed, married. The unmarried are second zone individuals condemned to “naked” invisibility, always on the run to seek a hideout from the preying gaze of the same men who established the laws against the unmarried females. In this sense, they must be

equated with the Osu who are on the bottom ladder, the dregs of society because their job is to collect refuse, which is their identifier in both society and in the fiction by Arimah.

The unmarried woman's status puts her on a par with the Osu caste also described by Arimah in her story. In fact, the people of this caste are like the untouchables in India, who are relegated to the second zones of society. Among the Igbo people, the Osu person is "dedicated to a god, a thing set apart – a taboo for ever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. [...] An osu could not attend an assembly of the free-born, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest" (C. Achebe, 1994, p. 156). In other words, the unclaimed woman is no different fundamentally from an osu, an outcast who will never graduate from his/her caste.

Some historians trace the origin of the Osu caste system to the time when the Igbo city states were under Odinani or the laws of the Earth. The deity was known under the name of Ala, which god made laws that had to be obeyed by all in order to, in return, see the entire nation prosper in the territory given to them by Chukwu, the Supreme God. Those who offended the god were found guilty of great sins and were cast away in order to fend off the wrath of the earth Deity. The outcasts are called the Osu.

Let's quote extensively from Ugoji Egbujo, according to whom

Historically, the Osu was a monk devoted to the service and worship of the local deity. And before the coming of the colonialists and the now prevalent Christianity, an Osu was respected, was perhaps considered holy. Then the Osu lived around the shrine and voluntarily consecrated himself to the gods. Communities appreciated the deities and their exploits in battles by donating some conquered slaves to the service of the gods. Though most slaves then were for transatlantic trade. The Osu, traditionally, didn't mingle much with others in the society because of their aura of consecration, the Diala didn't want to risk offending the gods by unrestrained interaction with gods' devotees. The Osu therefore married from amongst themselves. With the abolition of slavery and the exit of the European slave trader, the Osu population swelled further and they lost their

prestige and became an ostracized rather than a consecrated group. Anyone who married an Osu became an Osu as did his offsprings.⁹

Egbujo's sentence against what he calls a heathenish practice is the following:

It is [...] one thing to be disadvantaged by fate, it's another to be consigned to sub-humanity by human prejudice. Conceit and bigotry and hate sometimes coalesce to produce minds who arrogate to themselves superiority and allocate to others not just inferiority but sub-humanity. And contrary to reason and evidence, the racist just like the bigoted Diala finds pleasure in insisting that Jews or blacks or the 'Osu' are corrupted beings. (*Ibid.*)

Some concerned Nigerian citizens tie the story of the caste to the slavery at large in Africa. For instance, David Aduge-Anu et al state that

The practice of the outcast system popularly known as the Osu tradition in Igbo land dates back to the era of slave trade and war in the eastern states where victors took away their enemies as slaves, some of the slaves in turn were sacrificed to the gods and later branded 'Osu' in their new settlement. The Osu caste system has prevented many young men and women from the South East from marrying people of their choice. This tradition has not only led to a high number of ladies and young men remaining unmarried, it has equally led to frustration among this group.¹⁰

Okonkwo Emmanuel is of the opinion that

The solution to the acceptability of the Osu's, lies *more* on ethical and moral persuasion. Seminars in conjunction with the local government and the village chiefs and heads should be made to sensitize the people against the dreaded impart of Osu caste. The world is gradually sinking into the Hobbessian state of nature. But this state of nature is false and caused. The John Locke's state of nature must be redeemed. We must begin afresh to value the true virtues, less we all shall fall."¹¹

⁹ See Ugoji Egbujo's "The Osu caste system: The shame of a Nation." *Vanguard*. (13 March 2015).

¹⁰ See David Aduge-Ani, Stanley Uzoaru, and Okechukwu Obeta in "Osu Caste System: How It Affects Marriages in the S/East." *Leadership Nigeria*. (31 October 2014).

¹¹ See Emmanuel Okonkwo's "Opinion: A critique of the Osu caste system in Igboland." *YNaija.Com*. (March 24, 2014).

The practice of social stratification among the Igbo people, as much as it is the case in any vertically organized society, explains better the predicament of Osu caste system. Nwaubani, Adaobi Tricia writes that

Under slavery, Igbo society was divided into three main categories: *diala*, *ohu*, and *osu*. The *diala* were the freeborn, and enjoyed full status as members of the human race. The *ohu* were taken as captives from distant communities or else enslaved in payment of debts or as punishment for crimes; the *diala* kept them as domestic servants, sold them to white merchants, and occasionally sacrificed them in religious ceremonies or buried them alive at their masters' funerals. (A popular Igbo proverb goes, "A slave who looks on while a fellow-slave is tied up and thrown into the grave should realize that it could also be his turn someday.") The *osu* were slaves owned by traditional deities. A *diala* who wanted a blessing, such as a male child, or who was trying to avoid tribulation, such as a poor harvest or an epidemic, could give a slave or a family member to a shrine as an offering; a criminal could also seek refuge from punishment by offering himself to a deity. This person then became *osu*, and lived near the shrine, tending to its grounds and rarely mingling with the larger community. "He was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart—a taboo forever, and his children after him," Chinua Achebe wrote of the *osu*, in "*Things Fall Apart*" (The *ume*, a fourth caste, was comprised of the slaves who were dedicated to the most vicious deities).¹²

"A slave who looks on while a fellow-slave is tied up and thrown into the grave should realize that it could also be his turn someday."

¹² Nwaubani also adds that "Westerners trying to understand the Igbo system often reach for its similarities with the oppression of black Americans. This analogy is helpful but imperfect. Igbo discrimination is not based on race, and there are no visual markers to differentiate slave descendants from freeborn. Instead, it trades on cultural beliefs about lineage and spirituality. The *ohu* were originally brought to their towns from distant villages. Community ties are very important in Igbo culture, and so, while the descendants of, say, American immigrants are encouraged to assimilate, the *ohu* have never lost their outsider status. With the *osu*, the *diala* originally believed that mixing with a deity's slaves would earn them divine punishment. (In its spiritual aspect, the plight of the *osu* is similar to that of *dalits* in India or of *burakumin* in Japan, whose ancestors are believed to have done "polluting" work as butchers or tanners, and who are therefore thought to be impure.) With Christianization, the conscious aspect of this belief dissipated, but not without leaving traces. 'The fear people have is: before long, our children and children's children will be bastardized,' Okoro Ijoma, a professor of Igbo history at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, told me. 'It is about keeping their

As said earlier, there is a fine line between the condition of the unclothed woman in Arimah's "Skinned" and the Osu folks of the Igbo culture. In fact, the unclothed, unmarried women here are on a par with the Osu, those whom the sexist and condescending suitor of Odinaka calls the "debris". The untouchables of this story are primarily the Osu like the woman who boards the same bus as Ejem, even though Osu people do so with higher casted people. In the bus, the Osu woman is rendered invisible; the bus driver fails to look at her when she is about to pay her fare. The passengers on the bus do the same. They were embarrassed and annoyed at her presence. "[A]s the ride progresses, the osu woman squeez[ed] to let by passengers who didn't even acknowledge her" (p. 6). Here, Ejem does not seem much difference. On the bus, she makes a parallel between herself and the Osu. "She was so close to to becoming an unseen woman herself, unanchored from life and the people she knew, rendered invisible [but] it was only by the grace of god that she wasn't osu" (p. 6). Even Ejem, as unclaimed and rendered invisible as she is, sees a nuance between her and the casted people who she believes at one point

had a certain freedom [...] These osu women who performed domestic tasks, the osu men who labored in the mines or constructed the buildings she'd once designed – though her envy was checked by the knowledge that it was a freedom born of irrelevance. (p. 6)

Here, it is clear that Ejem, who is the epitome of the otherized woman, did not escape the logic of the fear of difference (heterophobia) that Albert Memmi refers to in his book *Racism*. According to Memmi, "Heterophobia would designate the many configurations of fear, hate, and aggressiveness that, directed against another, attempt to justify themselves through different psychological, cultural, social, or metaphysical means [...]" (A. Memmi, 2000, p. 118-19). In this specific instance of the Osu-unclaimed similarity, even othered Ejem too seeks to enjoy the privileges of being a freeborn, a *diala*. As Okonkwo says above, "The *diala* were the freeborn, and enjoyed full status as members of the human race." The problem is that among the *diala*, stratification is also in full effect.

When she comes back from the party where she goes unlawfully self-clothed, returns to her apartment only to cope with the presence of the Osu woman serving her, who seems to question Ejem's decision to go against the law like Odinaka. The Osu woman seems to say, like Doreen, that "dura lex,

lineage pure." See Nwaubani, Adaobi Tricia in "The Descendants of Slaves in Nigeria Fight for Equality." *The New Yorker* on July 11, 2019.

sed lex” (law is not fair, but it has to be obeyed). The Osu woman attempts to have more adepts at respecting the status quo, which Ejem is now resolved to revert and do away with. The question remains as to why Arimah has the Osu woman stalk Ejem throughout the story. Another way of seeing this is that there is a thin line between the Osu and the Unclothed of her story, which Ejem tries, as hard as she can to disprove.

The status quo, despite the rebellion spearheaded by Odinaka and her group of revolted women or female objectors, is more rigid and stable than not.

Conclusion

Nneka Lesley Arimah is to be commended for attempting to show the bare nakedness of female oppression in her own culture, and in general in the world beyond Africa. Society is still living with its dead bodies or dried bones in the cupboard: a woman is supposed to be the mate of a man, otherwise, she is close to nobodyness, nothing. This story must be read as another African female’s attempt to make things right for womenfolk in a society where gender roles are rigidly defined and enforced. The question that remains to be addressed is how successful Arimah is in her project of debunking patriarchal views on women and set them free.

The story seems to take the readers from one point only to bring them back to the same point. It is a full circle entrapping the woman she tries to set free. In fact, this story stands as a prime case of unfinished business, of undecidedness. There is a great deal of paradoxes assailing the quietness and expectations for a better living of the African woman in general and the Igbo particularly in this story. On the one hand, the story unravels a worldview whereby being a woman is a curse of sorts as the female portion of society only matters when it fits in the gender roles set up by the opposite sex, i.e., wifeness and womanhood. In other words, a woman is a woman only when she has a male mate to validate the ontological design blueprinted by the males of her society.

On the other hand, the unclothed female protagonists of this fictionalized culture seem to thrive modernly and this in a space that is revolutionized, a space with all the modern amenities, though fully entrenched in Igbo monolithic and superannuated mores and traditions. Ejem and Doreen are, for instance, modern; they are in a modern society, but they still feel reluctant, undecided when it comes to embracing the air of their age and day. If Doreen outrightly rejects the rebelliousness of Odinaka, Ejem at first complies with the rich woman only to feel guilty after meeting with Chidinma.

She runs and recoils in her apartment as if to say that she will be doing like Doreen. Her self-clothing, her attempt to rebel is fruitless and ineffectual. Is Arimah showing that these customs are hard to vanquish?

Also, that an Osu woman serves an unclothed woman is indeed a revolution of sorts. However, the Osu woman serving has some impact, one torturing Ejem to the point of not being able to set herself free from the strictures of the patriarchal design of her space and life. This tends to defeat Lesley Arimah's purpose, which is to denounce marginalization and thingification of women in a world where much depends on them. In a word, it is not exaggerated to claim that the story ends on a paradoxical note; the main character is in an unbreakable prison despite all her attempts she explores. Is it the reason why Ejem's story is titled "skinned", an animal that is killed, whose hide/skin is removed so as to avoid regeneration and eschew rebirth?

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