



THE FEMALE VOICE IN YORÙBÁ LITERARY SPACE: INTERROGATING GENDER AND POWER IN ÀRÌNPÉ ADÉJÚMÒ'S RÒ O RE POETRY.

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on Yorùbá literature often presents reductive portrayals of women as deceitful or unreliable. While some studies offer a balanced view, a significant gap remains in the analysis of how female writers construct female identity. This paper addresses this gap by examining the poetry of Arinpe Adejumo, a contemporary female poet, as a case study in feminist expression within the Yorùbá context. Focusing on her Rò o Re poetry collection, the study investigates how Adejumo employs poetic genre to challenge patriarchal norms. Utilizing feminism as the theoretical framework, the paper conducts a thematic and structural analysis of selected poems. The findings reveal that Adejumo's work is a deliberate advocacy for the equitable treatment of women within Yorùbá socio-cultural spheres. Far from reinforcing negative stereotypes, her poetry foregrounds women's agency and resilience, thereby countering their historical marginalization in literary representation. By giving voice to female experiences, Adejumo's Rò o Re poetry serves as a powerful tool for social commentary and the renegotiation of gender roles. The analysis demonstrates that her poems consistently advocate for what constitutes fair treatment for women, legitimized by the complex roles women play both in the texts and in society. This study contributes to the broader discourse on gender and literature by illuminating how a female Yorùbá poet uses indigenous poetic forms to articulate a vision of gender equity, thereby enriching both Yorùbá literary tradition and feminist literary scholarship in African contexts.

Keywords: Yorùbá literature, Feminist criticism, Gender advocacy, and Female identity.

Introduction

The representation of women and the challenges confronting them have remained a central concern in literary scholarship across cultures and disciplines. In African literary traditions, and particularly within Yorùbá literature, this concern is deeply intertwined with questions of identity, power, and cultural norms. Earlier critical engagements with Yorùbá texts have often reflected patriarchal assumptions, portraying women in reductive terms as deceitful, morally unstable, or socially disruptive figures (Olujinmi, 2005). While such portrayals are not entirely universal, they have significantly influenced both the production and interpretation of literary works, thereby shaping broader societal perceptions of womanhood within Yorùbá socio-cultural contexts.

In response to these longstanding representations, contemporary female writers have increasingly emerged as critical voices, interrogating dominant narratives and offering alternative constructions of female identity. Across the landscape of Yorùbá literature, writers such as Yémísí Adébòwálé, Fádékémi Adagbádá, and Àrìnpé Adéjùmò have contributed significantly to this shift. Their works span the major genres of Yorùbá literature, prose, drama, and poetry. They collectively challenge entrenched gender ideologies by foregrounding women's experiences, agency, and resilience.

Poetry, in particular, provides a unique medium for such engagements. As a genre characterized by linguistic economy, symbolism, and emotional intensity, it allows poets to articulate complex social realities and personal experiences in ways that are both evocative and subversive. Within the Yorùbá literary tradition, poetry is also deeply rooted in indigenous expressive forms such as *oríkì*, chants, and oral performance, making it a powerful vehicle for cultural commentary and social critique. Female poets, therefore, are able to draw on both traditional and modern poetic forms to interrogate gender relations and advocate for social transformation.

It is within this context that the poetry of Àrìnpé Adéjùmò becomes particularly significant. As a contemporary Yorùbá poet, Adéjùmò belongs to a category of literary practitioners whose works are disseminated through written publications such as books, journals, and periodicals, while still retaining strong connections to oral aesthetics. Her poetry reflects a conscious engagement with societal issues, especially those relating to gender inequality and the positioning of women within Yorùbá culture. Like many poets, her creative endeavor is driven by the desire to communicate lived experiences and provoke reflection among readers and listeners.

This paper focuses on Adéjùmò's poetry collection *Rò Ò Re* (2002), with the aim of examining how the poet constructs and articulates female identity within a patriarchal socio-cultural framework. By conducting a thematic and structural analysis of selected poems, the paper explores the ways in which Adéjùmò employs poetic techniques to challenge dominant gender ideologies and advocate for equitable treatment of women. Particular attention is given to her work redefining women's roles, not as passive subjects within male-dominated narratives, but as active agents capable of shaping their own destinies.

Furthermore, this work adopts feminist criticism as its theoretical framework, recognizing it as a critical tool for interrogating gender relations and exposing the power dynamics embedded in literary texts. Feminist literary criticism, especially within African contexts, emphasizes the need to situate gender discourse within specific cultural and historical realities rather than applying universalized Western models. In this regard, Adéjùmò's poetry offers a valuable site for examining how indigenous literary forms can be mobilized to articulate feminist concerns in culturally relevant ways.

Ultimately, the paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on gender and Yorùbá literature by highlighting the role of female poets in reshaping literary representation and social discourse. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of women, Adéjùmò's *Rò Ò Re* not only challenges stereotypical portrayals but also enriches the Yorùbá literary tradition through its engagement with issues of justice, identity, and empowerment.

Theoretical Framework

A combination of feminism and womanism will be used as the theoretical base of this study. Feminism means different things to different people, and this makes it difficult to have a concise universal definition of the term. Barrow and Milburn (1990:128) see feminism as a *Jebel* for a commitment or movement to achieve equality for women. J. A. Cuddon (1991:338) defines feminism as "an attempt to describe and interpret (or reinterpret) women's experiences as depicted in various kinds of literature." Ruth Sheila (1980:4) made it clear that what feminism means to different people depends on one's political or sociological observation and goals, one's understanding or interpretation of the word "woman," and several other factors.



From the above definitions, it is clear that whatever feminism means to different people, it revolves around the female experience. The propaganda of this theory shares the view that women's oppression is tied to their sexuality because of the biological differences between men and women as reflected in the organization of society. Therefore, the major aims of feminism are to combat female oppression and repression in all forms.

Feminism and Womanism

Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) reveals the negative portrayal of women as being sentimental and argues for intellectual equality with men, drawing support from the work of a progressive philosopher. According to her, feminism has undergone three waves. The first wave focused on the issue of the right to vote. The second wave of feminism emphasised civil rights and social and economic equality, while the third wave of feminism sought to accommodate the neglected or relegated women of colour. However, the first and second waves of feminism were strictly Western-oriented, as the interests of women of colour and third-world countries were not taken into consideration, and this feminist movement led to the emergence of third-wave of feminism.

Obviously, the central argument of feminism is to bridge prevailing on qualities of women. However, it is clear that feminism lacks a similar vision on how to achieve this goal as a common aim of the apparent inequalities is lacking. As a result, many forms of feminism have been identified. Many books have been published on feminist literary criticism by both male and female writers. Some are directed on assessing women's images in literature, while others investigate the criticism given on female writers. African American women were not included in Western-styled feminism. For this reason, womanism emerged before then; feminism claimed to be able to save all women from sexism and oppression. Walker (1984:12) defined womanist/womanism as;

"Black feminist or feminist of color.... A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes she loves individual men, and/or non-sexually, is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally, universalist lives music, loves dance, loves the moon, loves the spirit. Loves love and foods and roundness, love struggle, love folk. Loves herself. Regardless: womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

Womanism, just as feminism, is out to put an end to women's sufferings. It is true that in the nature of every human being, there is a desire to live in freedom, security, peace, and comfort. If this condition is absent, a response is expected; then, for this assertion, feminism and womanism are the reactions of women to patriarchal injustice, subjugation, oppression, and repression.

Appraisal of the Book *Rò ó Re*

Rò ó Re is a collection of poems written by Àrìnpé Adéjùmò. Most of the poems in the collection talk about women and the problems facing them in Yoruba society, that is patriarchal in nature. Adejumo, in her poems, repaints some of the derogatory images given to women in Yoruba

society. “Orí Ló Da Mi Lábo” “Ta Lòdàlè” “Afibişòlóore”, “Ààbò” and “Àgbára Abo” are poems used by Adejumo to educate the society about the hidden power of women, which Yoruba society is too blind to see in the good-for-nothing images given to women. She also uses some of her poems like *Alábòódó* and *Aláşejù* to teach and rebuke women who are found wanting in their lifestyles as women. These poems condemn women who are seen as the bad ones living within the frame of the patriarchal images given to women in Yoruba society.

Adejumo also illuminates the problems facing women in courtship and marriages in her poems like *Ìtànje*, *Ìlé-Èkò*, *Mórí Lọ*, *Ayé*, *Èrè Làbò Ọjà* and *Ìpò Èlẹgbẹ*. Poem such as *Ọgbón Àgbónjù*, *Ègún Àbépè*, *Òwú*, *Ètàn tutú* and *Ààrẹ* reflect and rebuke the bad attributes of some men in relationships and marriages, while “*Rò ó Re*”, the poem that carries the same title as the whole collection, is used to advise men to put a stop to their resentful desires toward their progressive wives.

Other poems from the collection talk about the different socio-political situations in the country. Some of the poems in this category are overtly didactic in nature because they talk about general topics affecting all and sundry, irrespective of their genders. Poems here include *Ominú N Kọni*, *Ajunilo*, *Aşòlinroilin*, *Atitẹbí*, *Àkùkọ Gàgàrà*, *A-múlẹ-Takẹkọ*, *Olúsó*, *Ilé Àròyanu*, *Èmọ Wólú*, *Ọjó Burúkú*, and *Oníkùn ló Mọkà*.

Thematic Preoccupation of *Rò ó Re*

Àrìnpé Adéjùmò’s *Rò ó Re* is a thematically rich poetic collection that engages profoundly with issues of gender, morality, and social order within the Yorùbá socio-cultural framework. At its core, the collection foregrounds the lived realities of women, interrogating their positioning within a patriarchal system while simultaneously advocating for equity, dignity, and recognition. However, what distinguishes Adéjùmò’s poetic voice is her balanced approach: she not only celebrates the strength and virtues of women but also critiques behaviours that may hinder their social advancement. This duality reflects a nuanced feminist consciousness rooted in cultural specificity rather than blind idealization.

A dominant thematic concern in *Rò ó Re* is the redefinition of female power.

In contrast to traditional patriarchal assumptions that frame women as inherently weak or subordinate, Adéjùmò reconstructs the female body and experience as sites of strength and influence. In the poem “*Àgbára abo*,” she identifies physical beauty, the breast, and the capacity for childbirth as symbolic representations of women’s power:

Bákọ fojú kẹwà abo
Ara akọ a jí pépé
Mo lágbára kan nú un
Ọyàn abo, kíkì agbára
Ìkúnlẹ abiyamọ nkó
Èrù jẹjẹ tí í bọmọ lẹrù

(Adéjùmò, 2002: 43-44)

If a man sights a lady's beauty,
He becomes excited
That is a certain power
Woman's breast if full of power,
What about parturition
A fearful sight that scares one



Through this imagery, the poet challenges entrenched notions of female inferiority by asserting that what is often perceived as “softness” or “vulnerability” is, in fact, a profound form of power. The emphasis on childbirth, in particular, reframes reproductive capacity as an act of courage and endurance rather than mere biological function. In contemporary discourse, this aligns with increasing global recognition of women’s bodily autonomy and the need to valorize reproductive labour, especially in societies where maternal mortality remains a critical issue.

Adéjùmò further reinforces her argument by invoking historical exemplars such as Tinubu and Moremi, thereby situating female strength within a continuum of cultural memory:

Bẹẹ bá gbàgbé ohun gbogbo

È sá à rántí Tinúbú

Ìyálóde Ègbá tó kojú ogun

Òun ló yÈgbá lóko ẹrú Ìdòòmì

Ogun tó kókùnrin láyà nífẹ níjósí

Se bí Mọremí ló fara rángun

Tó yọ Ifẹ kúrò lóko ẹrú Ìgbò

Abo lágbára

Akọ ló kò tí ò mọyì

(Adéjùmò 2002: 44)

Even if you forget everything

You should remember Tinubu

She was the one who delivered the Egbas from bondage

What of the war at Ife that met the men panting

It was Moremi that faced the war

She delivered Ife people

From the bondage of the Igbo

Women are powerful

It is only that men do not appreciate them (.....)

By referencing these iconic figures, the poet disrupts the narrative that women are passive participants in history. Instead, she foregrounds their roles as leaders, warriors, and agents of transformation. This historical grounding resonates with contemporary realities, where women continue to assert leadership across various sectors; political, economic, and intellectual. The visibility of African women in global leadership spaces today reinforces Adéjùmò’s assertion that female capability has always existed, even when unacknowledged.

Closely related to this is the theme of **maternal sacrifice and protection**. Adéjùmò presents motherhood not merely as a biological role but as a site of resilience, courage, and moral strength. Her allusion to the experience of Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s mother, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, who was violently attacked while defending her son, serves as a powerful illustration:

Ìyá kan, ìyá kàn lójìòsì

Lológun jú látorí pètẹ̀ẹ̀sì

Ìyá ọ̀hún ò kúkú jalẹ̀

Ikú ọ̀mọ niyá n kú lọ

(Adéjùmò 2002:30)

There was a woman

That was thrown from a storey building by soldiers

The woman did not steal



But was dying because of her child

This portrayal elevates motherhood to an almost heroic status, emphasizing the extent to which women are willing to endure suffering for the sake of their children. In contemporary Nigeria and beyond, such maternal resilience remains evident, particularly in contexts of social unrest, economic hardship, and political instability. Women continue to function as stabilizing forces within families and communities, often bearing disproportionate emotional and physical burdens.

Another critical thematic strand is the: **vulnerability and marginalization of widows**. In the poem “Ìpò Èlẹgbẹ”, Adéjùmò exposes the harsh realities faced by women following the death of their husbands:

Ikú ọkọ, àdánwò nlá

Ikú ọkọ a sabo dọdẹ

A sabo dàjẹ

A sabo demèrè

Ìyà opó pọ

(Adéjùmò 2002:63)

The death of husband, a great tribulation

The husband's death made the woman a moron

It made her a witch

It made her a woman of evil spirit

Widow's suffering is much

The poet highlights how widows are subjected to suspicion, stigmatization, and social isolation, often being accused of witchcraft or moral wrongdoing. This reflects deeply entrenched cultural practices that position women as dependent on male authority. Despite modernization and legal reforms, such practices persist in many communities, making this theme highly relevant. The poem not only documents suffering but also serves as a subtle call for social reform and empathy.

While advocating for women's rights and dignity, Adéjùmò does not shy away from addressing **internal challenges within the female community**. She criticizes laziness and overdependence on male providers, urging women to embrace hard work and self-reliance:

Bírú wọn rí pátá tó wuyì

Wọn a ní ẹ kírí wá tí baba bá dé

(Adéjùmò 2002:27)

When they see a good pant

They will tell the seller to come

When the husband is around

This critique aligns with contemporary feminist discourse that emphasizes economic empowerment as a key pathway to gender equality. In today's socio-economic climate, where financial independence is increasingly linked to autonomy and decision-making power, Adéjùmò's admonition remains particularly relevant. Women's participation in entrepreneurship, digital economies, and professional sectors reflects a gradual shift away from dependency models.

The poet also engages with **maternal health and childcare practices**, condemning unsafe childbirth methods and advocating for medical intervention:

È yé bímọ sílẹ nítorí èèsì

Èèsì burúkú ò ní ẹ –

(Adéjùmò 2002:40)



A tàwa àtòmọ
 Stop having child delivery at home
 To avoid costly mistake
 You will not be a victim of such mistake
 Likewise myself and children

This theme is especially significant in light of ongoing public health challenges. Nigeria continues to record high maternal and infant mortality rates, often linked to inadequate healthcare access and cultural resistance to hospital-based delivery. Adéjùmò's poetry thus functions as an early form of health advocacy, promoting awareness and behavioural change

Socio-Political Issues

Beyond gender-focused themes, **Rò ó Re** engages critically with broader societal issues, reflecting the poet's awareness of the socio-political environment. One of the most prominent concerns is **corruption in leadership**. In the poem "**Ominú n kọmì**", Adéjùmò condemns the falsification of records and dishonesty among political leaders:

Kààsàkààsà gbogbo ẹ tún nkọ
 Aṣáájú tún n purọ ojọ orí
 Aṣáájú gbéwèè ẹrí èké kiri
 The worst of it all
 A leader is falsifying his age record
 A leader is holding a fake certificate

(Adéjùmò 2004:4)

This critique remains strikingly relevant in contemporary Nigeria, where issues of accountability, transparency, and ethical leadership continue to dominate public discourse. By exposing these flaws, the poet positions literature as a tool for political consciousness and civic engagement.

The theme of **insecurity** is also vividly portrayed. Adéjùmò describes a society where individuals can no longer feel safe even within their own homes:

Àwọ̀n àgbà àsùwà yí nàà ló ní
 A kí gbẹ̀lẹ̀ ẹni ká fọ̀rùn rọ
 Bí i torílé yìkọ
 A ti rẹni ó gbẹ̀lẹ̀
 Táwọ̀n ẹ̀lẹ̀gírí kámólẹ̀

(Adéjùmò 2002:3)

The elder says
 One does not get wounded at home
 This is not the situation in this land
 We have seen people who stay indoor
 But still have been attacked by armed robbers

This reflects the pervasive climate of fear associated with crime, violence, and instability. The normalization of such insecurity underscores the urgency of systemic reform and highlights the role of literature in documenting societal anxieties.

Other Dimensions of Social Experience

Adéjùmò extends her critique to religious exploitation, exposing the manipulation of vulnerable individuals by unscrupulous spiritual leaders. In “Olúsó”, she condemns the abuse of power within religious institutions:

Àimọye abo lolùsọ ti sọ sínú ìdè

Èwọn sì kọ, ìdè ìbálòpọ ni

Wọn a ní nínú àtọ wọn lagbára wá

Bábo ò bá gbájèsára ibẹ

Àtàiṁọ kógun ò má labo bẹẹ pa (Adéjùmò 2002:36)

Many females have been put in bondage by shepherded

Not a real jail but sexual imprisonment

They claim miraculous power lies in their sperm

If a woman collects such immunization

She might remain a loser

This theme resonates strongly in contemporary society, where numerous cases of spiritual abuse and exploitation have been reported. The poet’s warning underscores the need for critical awareness and personal agency, particularly among women who are often the primary targets of such manipulation.

The poet also reflects on youth behaviour and social unrest, particularly in relation to student activism and clashes with law enforcement. This highlights the tension between youthful expression and institutional authority, a dynamic that continues to shape contemporary socio-political landscapes.

Finally, Adéjùmò presents a poignant depiction of the healthcare system, illustrating the suffering and emotional distress associated with illness and inadequate medical facilities:

Kásuàtí nkọ

Ìyẹn ò ẹ́ ẹ́ wò

È wá wẹ̀jẹ

Igbe ó n ta mí

Ó n ro mí

What of the emergency section?

A pitiable sight to behold

Blood everywhere

Screaming in pain

This imagery captures the harsh realities of healthcare experiences, evoking empathy and drawing attention to systemic deficiencies.

Conclusion

In sum, *Rò ó Re* is a multidimensional poetic work that transcends gender advocacy to engage with a wide spectrum of societal issues. Adéjùmò’s thematic preoccupations reflect a deep commitment to social critique and transformation. By combining feminist advocacy with moral and political commentary, she demonstrates the capacity of Yorùbá poetry to function as both a cultural archive and a vehicle for progressive change. Her work not only challenges patriarchal norms but also calls for introspection within society at large, making *Rò ó Re* a significant contribution to both Yorùbá literary studies and contemporary feminist discourse.



African women have long been faced with the issues of negligence or relegation in a society that is largely patriarchal. In this study, we have been able to see the reflections and symbols of women's power and virtues objecting the patriarchal society's belief that women are weak. The paper has succeeded in bringing to the fore the image of Yoruba women as painted by Adéjùmò. As a mother and womanist herself, she is able to portray women through her personal and creative experiences as a regenerative symbol of motherhood and procreator.

Though, women are not completely saints, there are wolves in sheep's clothing among the flock, as seen in the poems. But female's involvement in writing Yoruba literature like Adéjùmò and others will gear most women in society toward reconstructing the image of the woman, and women will not be depicted as nurturers, comforters, and homemakers in the society. The study finally examined the socio-political disposition of the poet without learning out her views toward other experiences of life. The majority of the poems in the book overtly advocate for the roles of women in Yoruba society, which is a microcosm of Africa. Hence, we can see Àrìnpé Adéjùmò as a womanist who wants a new face for the female gender in African society.

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