

## Prostitution: Feminist Project in Bode Osanyin's *The Noble Mistress*

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### **Abstract**

*The bottom-line of feminist literature is to give a healthy image to the woman and eliminate social discriminations against her in the society. Women in different societies neither belong to same class nor face same problems. So are the perceptions of women's problems and approaches to the issue of equality with men. Bode Osanyin, a contemporary Nigerian male writer in his novel, *The Noble Mistress* focuses on the class of women called prostitutes. This essay analyses his perception of prostitutes and prostitution in the novel.*

### **1. Introduction**

In almost all human societies, from ancient time to date, acts of sexual immorality such as adultery, fornication, prostitution and others are abhorred and sanctioned. A prostitute, courteously called a commercial sex-worker, is a woman who sells her body to men for a living. She is a highly derided personality. She is "unsellable" in the market of honour and integrity. It is this type of woman that Bode Osanyin makes a case for. In *The Noble Mistress*, Osanyin repackages and foists the prostitute on our consciousness of justice and fairness.

Osanyin's approach to fictional creativity is through the adoption of the autobiographical mode. It is the prostitute herself who narrates the story, thus giving us first hand information about the life of prostitutes. The novel is couched in a dark humour. With a great deal of satire, Jojolo, a prostitute who is the principal character in the novel chronicles the circumstances that drive her to the street with its precarious existence. She also tells of the lamentation of prostitutes in a society that suffers from social, economic and political "haemorrhage". The prostitute is presented as one who deserves our sympathy and can be reformed. The narrator debunks our conventional understanding of the notion of prostitution as the sin of commercial sex-work by women. She widens the concept of prostitution to include the different types of crimes prevalent in our society in which almost all of us are involved, in one way or the other. We then are all sinners. Therefore, in our stereotyping and condemnation of a class of women called prostitutes, we are equally culpable sinners condemning and hauling stones on other "sinners", simply because we have stigmatized only that brand of sin.

An amalgamation of different strands of poverty drives Jojolo to the street. Jojolo hails from a poor, inter-ethnic and polygamous family. Her father, Osinbilu is a womanizer who has five wives. Jojolo's mother, Alero, who is the fifth wife, is an Itshekiri while the others and their husband are Yoruba. The family of Osinbilu suffers from material poverty. The large family members neither feed well nor have decent accommodation. Because of poverty, Osinbilu and his wives feast on "gbanga" soup, excluding their children (p.24). Although Osinbilu is ambitious to be seen as a car owner, he can only co-own an old rickety car called "Consul" with two of his friends. When his friends become tired of repairing the car, they sell it to him. Maintaining the car becomes a big liability to the family. In the end, the emotional attachment the family has to the car notwithstanding, Osinbilu contracts a person to dump it in Lagos Lagoon. Talking about the rickety car, Jojolo says, "I remember sitting in him in his last days, a needle pinched me in the buttocks.

The springs of his tattered seats were letting loose and doing havoc to innocent buttocks" (p. 49).

Osinbilu and his wives cannot give good nurturing to their children because of poverty. Jojolo's frequent presence in Casino Cinema in Oko Biriko is symptomatic of a home that lacks the home video and does not prevent the children from visiting a film house. It is in Casino Cinema that Jojolo is exposed to Western films like the "Cow-boy" and others that espouse indecency, violence and bravery. The watching of such films contributes to the development of the fearless and aggressive personality streak in Jojolo. It predisposes her to easily settle in the den of prostitutes, hooligans, touts and other criminals, and also fires her admiration for a dangerous man like Jacknobody at River Thames. There, Jojolo says of Jacknobody, "I saw in him elements and patches of the heroes I had adored in many Western films. His braggadocio dazzled me as a young girl.... He capitalized on my hero-worshipping." (p. 124)

Yet, there is poverty of love in Osinbilu's family. This is inter-twined with the poor economic status of the family. Alero, Jojolo's mother, is a generous and bumptious woman. Being a seamstress, she has some material independence and this enables her to prepare the cherished "gbanga" soup for their husband and her co-wives without asking to be paid for by their husband. Their husband loves her more than his other wives and for this Alero becomes an object of the co-wives' hatred. At the height of their hostility to her, they break her "gbanga" soup pot and exclude her from their meetings. Osinbilu's love alone cannot secure her safety and peace in her matrimonial home. Unable to cope with the hostility of the co-wives, she leaves and speaks to Jojolo as follows:

*Your father is a loving man. I wish I could have him all alone to myself. But I have many seniors to battle with. A good fighter should know when to surrender. I have to surrender now. Everybody has a rightful place in this world. You belong here. I don't belong (p.25).*

Jojolo's mother deserts her at a tender age, an age she needs the love and care of the mother to mould her into a reasonable personality. That is why Jojolo laments the loss of such motherly presence using graphic imagery. Thus, "My mother was gone. Gone. She disappeared like early morning dew in the presence of the rising sun." (p. 26)

Jojolo's step-mothers extend their hatred for Alero to Jojolo because they know that their husband loves her passionately the way he loved her mother. The lack of motherly care and love coupled with the hostility of her step-mothers make Jojolo to be an alien in her home and contributes to her wild and aggressive personality, which she admits in these words, "In the school I became a terror. I beat boys as if they were little children. Girls ran away from me as if I were a dragon vomiting fire" (p. 26).

In the hostility of Jojolo's step-mothers to her, they fail to give her the needed moral support in her court case with Chief Raji who encroaches on her sexual innocence. They insinuate that Jojolo gave her consent before Chief Raji had sex with her. Many years later when Jojolo meets her step-mothers at the Administrator's office to collect the dead body of her father who was killed by Jacknobody, they still vent their hostility to her. Jojolo narrates, "We met several times at the Administrator's office and they eyed me with evil eyes! On one occasion the fourth wife rushed forward to sink her teeth on my chest. I was only saved by the timely intervention of a sergeant who stopped her by coming in between us like a wedge" (p. 127)

Prostitutes have a common history of abandonment and suffering. Like Jojolo, Caroline was deserted by her mother when she was very young (p. 111). Like Jojolo too, Auntie Rose comes from a poor family. She has experienced "a spell of slavery in Sao Tome" (p. 69). She reveals that as a child, she could count on her finger tips how many times she had eaten meat in her village (p. 95). Auntie Rose has four children and an aged mother to take care of. Poverty, which is one of the factors that drive Jojolo into prostitution, also pushed Auntie Rose into the same social vice.

Reinforcing the aforementioned factors that throw Jojolo into the world of prostitution is the poverty of social justice in her society. Jojolo and her father lose the litigation of her being raped

by Chief Raji. The legal system of the society is corrupt. It cannot protect the poor. Court judgments are in the favour of the rich and the powerful. Instead of being punished, Chief Raji and his accomplice, Mr Alonge, Jajolo's teacher, continue to soar high in their respective career. After the court case, Chief Raji rises to become a local government Chairman from his former lowly position as a Councilor. He later becomes a Minister. Mr Alonge rises from his position of classroom teacher to become a vice-principal (pp. 55-56). The court asks Osinbilu to pay a "staggering" cost to chief Raji. Because of poverty, Jajolo and her father cannot go to an appeal court for redress. Jajolo feels hopeless and unprotected. The lack of material security, love and care in the family, along with injustice in the society drive Jajolo irretrievably into the world of prostitution.

Osanyin's portrays the prostitute as one who lives in a chain of miseries created by her society. Yet, even in her helplessness and hopelessness, she reasons and should therefore have our sympathy. In her first camp, at River Thames, Jacknobody in whom she thinks she finds love and protection, she pays dearly for it. Jacknobody does not only use her as his quarry but takes a large percentage of her earnings:

*Jacknobody regularly had me, this way. He usually wore me out. That was his trick. How could I prosper this way. Before each major outing, he consumed me ravenously like this. He thought it to be his due... And yet, I had to give a handsome percentage of the proceeds (p. 66).*

Cornelia, a fellow prostitute, nursed her private part for several days after being raped by a soldier who gave her a bogus cheque to be cashed in an intimidating barrack (P. 130). Some employers of labour demand to take the prostitute to bed before giving a job that will not be available (P. 205). Licentiousness and betrayal for which prostitutes are serious victims pervades the society. The plight of the prostitute in this regard is further dramatized in the relationship between Klaus Meyer and Jajolo. Klaus Meyer, a German sailor promises to marry Jajolo after their meeting in paradise club. He camps her in "Hideout Suite" for three months. After building in her the confidence that the intended marriage is real, he made her pregnant but deserts her, leaving her with only ninety eight pounds. Jajolo recalls her time with Meyer with obvious relish:

*...My happiest moment was with him. It was not necessarily because he gave me German sweets and candies to suck, nor because he fed me with sumptuous food and wine.... Klaus had on many occasions taken me to his boat called "Phantom". Inside "Phantom" we had the equivalent of state banquets. His friends had started to call me Frau Meyer, which meant Mrs Meyer (p.123).*

When Meyer deserts her, she laments, "Shame covered me from every front when my intended husband deserted me. I lost face with my father and I could not go back to Jacknobody" (p.89). Jajolo's blissful account of her period with Meyer in the "Hide-out suite" and lamentation after been deserted by him, at once, represents the voice of a prostitute who wants to live a normal life. Although Jajolo cherishes motherhood, lack of economic security forces her to engage in rigorous exercises to get rid of the pregnancy even though to no avail. Awfully, in pregnancy, she goes back into prostitution.

The life of the prostitute is trailed by pains and tragedies. A week after Meyer deserted Jajolo, her estranged boy-friend and pimp, Jacknobody kills her father, Osinbilu for his opposition to his daughter's relationship with him. While mourning her father, her accommodation problem compels her to squat with Auntie Rose, a fellow prostitute, for two weeks before both of them secure apartments in the "Secretariat", a place the government has built for working class ladies who are single and do not want to stay with their parents but need protection.

To put the police's investigation of the killing of Osinbilu in difficulty, Jacknobody goes to the "Secretariat" in the night and mistakenly beholds Auntie Rose for Caroline, a fellow prostitute in the "Secretariat" who claims witnessing the killing of Osinbilu by Jacknobody. He equally attempts

to kill Jojolo. In Jacknobody, we see a man covering evil with evil. The Government responds to the incident in the "Secretariat" by driving the inhabitants away and handing over the place to a Missionary Organization. The horrifying incident in the "Secretariat", the prevalence of prostitution, cow-boy groups in Oko Biriki, robbery and poverty in contrast to power, opulence and splendour which characterizes the life of a few in the society speak volumes of a government that lacks idea on good governance.

It is in prostitution that Jojolo gives birth to a female child, named Tosheju. The joy of motherhood, in spite of her pains and sorrow makes her to take proper care of her:

*I lavishly spent much of my hard won money on her. I would go to the best departmental stores to buy her latest shoes, clothing and toys. As a baby, she ate the most nutritious baby food in town. I bought all her things from the most exclusive shops ... This child would compensate for all my suffering. She would be my heroine (p.135).*

Jojolo`s relationship with Mobolaji da Costa further exposes the plight of the prostitute, the pervasive and deeply rooted moral and social dislocations in the society. Mobolaji, a chartered Accountant has numerous girl-friends and illicit children. He is spendthrift and has mismanaged the property he inherited from his parents. He takes Jojolo as his exclusive Mistress, gets her a flat, provides her material needs, sends Jojolo`s daughter to a school but abandons Jojolo emotionally. Jojolo`s condition of loneliness drives her to be infatuated with Ikenga Okafor, a man she meet at Oasis Super Market. Ikenga is a play-boy and criminal. By the time Mobolaji is sentenced to twenty years imprisonment for misappropriating and embezzling government money, Ikenga has swindled Jojolo out of her bank account and she has little or nothing with which to pay rent to her landlord whose love advances she had rejected (P. 179). The motif of betrayal in the novel is accentuated in the stealing from Mobolaji`s bank account by his "beloved" wife. Comparing his wife with Jojolo, Mobolaji says to Jojolo:

*Please, don't pray to be like her. You are an angel when it comes to that. She betrayed me. My wife betrayed me. Are you listening Jojolo? (p. 173).*

Rendered bankrupt, the imperative of survival sends Jojolo back into the world of prostitution, a world she had left for many years. Jojolo laments, "After many years of comfortable life, I had to contend with a small room in a vast slum" (P.180) Jojolo describes New City this way:

*New City was a kingdom of the underworld. Its very capital. The crime around here was said to be the highest in the country. Peddlers, hardened criminals and the like owned the roads and lanes, day and night (p. 182).*

New City is a metaphor of a society that is in debacle. Senator Alhaji Shinkafa traces the roots of the social and economic problems of the nation to the primitive selfishness and greed of rulers:

*From glorious oil boom and potential prosperity for all, we had suddenly become a beggar-nation.... The national wealth drifted into private pockets. The pockets of our Honourables swelled, while the treasury of people because empty. Commonwealth becomes common woe (pp. 246 & 247).*

In New City, Dr Oluwade`s relationship with Jojolo reveals that even the educated and enlightened among men can be unprincipled and the prostitute, against general expectation, be reasonable in amorous affairs. Dr. Oluwade becomes Jojolo`s friend and stays with her while in New City to do a study on the life of prostitutes. He lavishes a good part of his research fund on her and is caught attempting to commit incest with Jojolo`s daughter. Jojolo`s indignation about this drives her to invite the police for him, thus, bringing their relationship to a sudden and bitter

end.

The denouement of Jojolo`s relative, stable-marital relationships with men in the novel is that of Shinkafa. Alhaji Senator Shinkafa promises to marry and keeps her in "Glass House" at Victoria Island as his lady. Shinkafa takes care of Jojolo and her daughter materially and emotionally, she becomes pregnant now and declines going to night clubs even at the behest of her husband because she does not want anything that would remind her of the dirty past. Here, we see the prostitute as amenable to reformation.

However, the destiny of the prostitute and of course, the entire citizens is inexorably intertwined with the cyclical journey of political, social and economic crises of the nation. The corrupt civilian government is overthrown by soldiers whose government cannot be different from the civilians`. Shinkafa, an advocate of political and economic sanity is tragically killed. "Glass House" is ruined. Jojolo finds herself in the hospital with a bandage on her right foot and stitches on her private part. The soldiers had shot and raped her. Shinkafa`s accounts, like those of other politicians are frozen. Jojolo has not saved money and cannot make any claim to the late husband`s property because they are not legally married. She goes back to meet Angelina in the dreadful New City for a lodging. Her attempt to unite with the family of her late husband does not produce any happy result, as the sexually greedy elder brother of her late husband; Yusuf wants her to be inherited as his wife. Jojolo runs away. She models maternity dress in a company called Dualiac; but this alone cannot guarantee her survival. With her pregnancy, Jojolo goes into prostitution again.

## 2. Conclusion

*The Noble Mistress* is unarguably a literary work that is steeped in feminist discourse. Osanyin focuses on the class of women known as prostitutes. Unabashedly, he effectively makes a case for them by presenting them as victims of the social, economic and political dislocation in the society. The prostitute therefore deserves our sympathy. To widen our radar on societal malady, he draws our attention to the parallelism between the prostitutes and the rich, the notable, house wife, soldiers, leaders-civilian or military and the society in general because they are all involved in ignoble acts that have thrown the society into disarray and pain. It is Osanyin`s belief that some sinners in our society are even worse than the conventional prostitutes. He draws our attention to the need for the rehabilitation of the prostitutes.

Osanyin`s perception of feminism is African or womanist. The representative of the prostitutes, the narrator, through whom Osanyin portrays his feminist vision, cherishes the matrimonial union of a man and woman. She is faithful and loyal in her unstable matrimonial relationships with men: from Meyer, Mobolaji to Shinkafa. At the end of the story, and in spite of all her travails with men, Jojolo fervently wishes to get married. She likes marriage that is anchored on love, understanding and freedom. Jojolo also believes that as a woman, this is necessary for her achievement and happiness in life when she says, "... I think the important thing now is to get married, get hooked on to somebody, a kind-hearted man, full of understanding, a liberal being who is ready to forgive what I had been and help me to be a success at this modeling and other noble ventures that may follow. I will like to leave this hotel soon and start a new home built on love" (p. 285). On the whole, a healthy marital relationship which is advocated in the novel functions within the context of ethos of African feminism.

Motherhood is a cherished principle in African feminism and this rears its head in the personality of Jojolo through her love and care for children. It is for her love of motherhood that she suffers for Tosheju. It is her concern for the fair nurturing of children and respect for African moral values that Jojolo tells us of her watching Western films and the pernicious influence they exerted on her. In the stories of Tosheju despising and abandoning Jojolo, Senator Momoh`s daughter eloping with a Buddhist Indian and the indecent behaviour of the youths at Tosheju`s birthday and graduation party in the "Glass House", Jojolo brings our attention to the corrosive

influence of Western Culture and awakens us to the responsibility of imparting African moral values in the youths so that they do not engage in acts that will bring sorrow to their parents or the elders. This is because respect for African moral values is also part of the ethos of African feminism.

In the length and breadth of the narrative, the story teller makes references to the chaotic social, economic and political systems that are the root causes of poverty, prostitution, thuggery, assassination, and other social problems in the society. The writer therefore is not only concerned with "the woman question", but also the health of the society in general as a fundamental principle of African feminism.

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