

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MENSTRUAL CYCLE IN NIGERIAN WOMEN AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ROLE IN DEVELOPMENT.

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ABSTRACT

The notion of 'women' has been designated in both sex and gender terms. The former gives credence to the biological definition of woman as human females while the latter emphasizes social or cultural determination of the 'human female' by virtue of social position, role, norm as well as expectation. In another outlook, the two conceptions are adopted interchangeably, such that being a woman means being 'female'. However, this work cues to the notion of 'woman' in gender terms, implying that women sexuality (as female) is construed socially via the position/roles ascribed to women given their feature of physiological state or processes. Of significance is the phenomenon of menstruation which has been conceived in a general sense as a 'dirty' interlude in the cycle of womanhood in Nigeria. Adopting symbolic interactionism as a theoretical approach, emphasis was made to this view which bears an implication that the phenomenon of menstrual cycle within this context is socially construed and thus influence the interpretation of women sexuality. This is considered as a factor responsible for the subordinate identity, roles and position ascribed to women in the course of development or progress of the Nigerian society.

Keywords: Women, Sexuality, Menstrual cycle, Development, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

WOMEN SEXUALITY: GENDER-SEX DISTINCTION

In intellectual circles and discourses on gender-sex distinction has been vocalised mostly by feminists such that often times it is conceived within the mainstream of feminist standpoints. However, Nicholson (1994, 1998) has informed that until the 1960s, gender was solely used to refer to masculine and feminine words like 'le' and 'la' in French. In order not to reduce this discourse to one that gives credence to feminist standpoint, it is fundamental that the understanding of gender-sex distinction be granted as one which centres on issue of biological and social/psychological differences between the broad category of men and women. Thus, it is expedient to examine the speculations of scholars to attain hindsight of perspectives on this issue and its interpretation for women sexuality subsequently.

Prior to embarking on this endeavour, it is important to note that the distinction between sex and gender which came to dominate theorization in the cosmology of gender in 1970s is premised upon the idea of universality of 'sex' and variability of 'gender' (Agrawal, 2008). There is a hint that the terms can be traced to Stoller (1968), an American psychiatrist, who used them to deal with cases of individuals whose biological sex did not match their gender. With Oakley (1972), sex-gender distinction became prominent in sociology; sex referring to the biological difference between male and female, the visible differences in genitalia and related difference in procreative function; gender being a matter of culture referring to the social classification into 'masculine and feminine'. This binary categorization has earmarked the differences between the human male as man and human female as woman, in sex and

gender terms respectively. Arguments have been conjured from biological and non-biological/social angles to propel such claims.

Geddes and Thompson have argued from a biological deterministic point on the basis that the gendered nature of the human species (constitutive sexual characteristics) correlates to their metabolic states; on the assumption that the former man is equivalent to male and women to female. They argued that social psychology and behavioural traits were caused by the metabolic state of humans; women being anabolic and men being katabolic. Being anabolic connotes passiveness, conservatism, sluggishness, stable and disinterestedness in politics/active domains while being katabolic means to expend surplus energy, expressiveness, eagerness, passion, energetic urge for variety, and interest in politics and other active social domains.¹

Geddes and Thompson's view is straight to the point as regards the differences between human categories of male men and female women, which suggests by extension that sexual/biological inclination accounts for gender and also that the constitutive behavioural states are the basis for the justification of social and political predicaments and arrangements of both gender in the society. Thus, a conceivable distinction between sex and gender following this view may not be guaranteed beyond the distinction of biological states of men and women. This approach may not be rewarding for an adequate understanding of the matter at hand as it confounds the distinction without a viable explanation of how 'femaleness and maleness' is constitutive of 'womanliness and manliness' consecutively.

Beyond this, attempts by Fausto-Sterling (1993a ; 993b) has shown that the binary categorical sexual system is not encapsulating of all the sexes there are in reality, that is the two-sex system is not adequate enough. Fausto-Sterling's clamour about the five sexes (inclusive of the herms, merms and ferms) exposes the inadequacies of Geddes and Thompson's assumption since the equivalent 'gendering' of these other sexes is yet to be accounted for. Stoller (1968) portrayed the distinction through the argument that gender after all could be the extent of masculine and feminine qualities/attributes trapped in the sexual bodies of males or females; such that the female or male may exhibit equal traits of masculinity and femininity or one in excess over the other that is a sort of 'trans-sexuality' (Stoljar, 1995; Haslanger, 2000).

This preceding argument presents an analysis of gender-sex distinction on an unclear basis of what would constitute the content of gender attribution to the category of tran-sexual persons so conceived. It rarefies the gender-sex distinction and provides no proof on whether the human body/person is all through socially construed. However, there is a possible interpretation that the distinction may not after all be rarefied since sexual roles may culminate to gender roles. For instance, the psyche of care in women could be connected to the capacity of nurture (conception and child-birth); tendencies which may not be naturally common in man, though do not guarantee that men cannot exhibit the capacity of care. This means that adequate clarifications need to be rendered for Stoller's account of the justification of the extent of traits discerned masculine or feminine, trapped in the sexed body of male or female respectively; that is the viability of the notion of trans-sexuality. Nicholson's (1994) 'coat-rack' approach

¹Thompson and Geddes cited in Moi, Toril, 1999. *What is a woman?* Oxford: OUP

shares the same view with Stoller that the sexed bodies are like coat-racks and provide the site upon which gender is constructed.

De Beauvoir's assertion has an indication for gender-sex distinction. For Beauvoir (1949), one is not born but rather becomes a woman. This simply means that while sex categories are naturally innate, a matter of biology and fixed, gender is acquired, learned or a social assimilation of traits and behaviour. Beauvoir's insight seems charitable for the distinction between the biological and socio-cultural determinism of sex and gender respectively and is thus expressly clear on the distinction. For scholars like Anthony, Grosz, Prokhovnik and Butler (Anthony, 1998; Grosz, 1994; Prokhovnik, 1999; Butler, 1990), the gender-sex distinction is at most a myth or fiction, because there seems to be no tenable distinction between the two as there are none between nature (biology) and culture (social). For instance, Butler (1990) impressed that sex is gender and is a social construction. In her view, the sexed body mainly function as a 'performatory' entity or has performative roles; thus it serves also as the basis of gendering.

Butler among others simply imply that even the categories of sex as male/female are tied to the norms established by social meanings/attribution to them in gender terms (as men and women), therefore there is no such distinction that could emerge from a supposed objective physical or genital constitution of human bodies in the world. From a contrary point of view, Stone (2007) has argued that social construction of sex and gender is not the same as asserting that sex is identical to gender; what could at most be asserted is that sex (as male or female) implies gender norms, that may create by extension oppressive or suppressive categories. Gender in this term then becomes a socially imposed division of the sexes such that as a paradigm, it subscribes to a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention (Rubin, 1975).

Following this, an attempt is made to situate the discourse within the context of the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society; to engage an aspect of the social life which is the subordination of women, one that is a consequence of the social conventional reading (of norms, tradition and practice) that dictate women's place, roles or expectations in certain condition or state would not be out of place. Hinging on the specific phenomenon of menstrual cycle in women that is conveyed as a phenomenon of dirtiness within the Nigerian society, which has implication for roles and social positioning of women in such condition is expedient. It is important not to assume that the idea of menstrual cycle in women is taken as granted in the sections that follow.

MENSTRUAL CYCLE IN WOMEN

A baby girl is born with over 450,000 eggs in her body, which are stored in her ovaries, each inside its own sac called follicle. As she matures into puberty, her body begins producing various hormones that cause the eggs to mature. This is the beginning of her first cycle and this will repeat itself till she attains the stage of menopause. The menstrual cycle is the cycle of natural changes that occurs in the uterus and ovary as an essential part of making sexual reproduction possible. The cycle is essential for the production of eggs and for the preparation of the uterus for pregnancy (Silverthorn, 2013). In human females, the menstrual cycle occurs repeatedly between the ages of menarche, when cycling begins, until menopause when it ends.

The periodicity of menstruation gives rise to commonly used terms such as 'period' and 'monthly' (Logan, 1997).

The menstrual cycle involves the development of a nutrient rich lining (the endometrium) within a woman's uterus that will cushion and nourish a developing foetus should impregnation occur. If the pregnancy does not occur, this lining is released in what is known as menstruation or menstrual period. Regular menstruation lasts for a few days, usually 3 to 5 days, but most times 2 to 7 days is considered normal. The average menstrual cycle is 28 days long from the first day of one menstrual period to the first day of the next period. A normal menstrual cycle in adult women is between 21 and 35 days (Ziporyn, Kareen and Eisenstat, 2014). In adolescents, there is wider variation and cycles are normally between 21 and 45 days. Menstrual symptoms occurring before menstruation, such as breast pain, swelling, bloating, and acne are termed premenstrual *molimina*.

Menstrual fluid is the correct name for the flow, although many people prefer to refer to it as menstrual blood. The menstrual fluid contains some blood, as well as cervical mucus, vaginal secretions and endometrial tissue. Menstrual fluid is reddish-brown, a slightly darker colour than venous blood. Unless a woman has a blood borne illness, menstrual fluid is harmless. No toxins are released in menstrual flow, as this is a lining that must be pure and clean enough to have nurtured a baby. Menstrual fluid is more dangerous than regular blood. More so, heavy menstrual bleeding, occurring monthly can result in anaemia. This descriptive expatiation of the phenomenon of menstrual cycle has attached social meanings, which varies from one cultural context to the other.

SOCIAL CONSTRUE OF MENSTRUAL CYCLE IN NIGERIA

Symbolic interactionism, a distinctly American branch of sociology developed by a group of American philosophers is concerned with explaining social actions in terms of the meanings that individuals give to them. George Herbert Mead (1863 – 1931) who is generally regarded as the founder of symbolic interactionism stated that human thought, experience and conduct are essentially social (Mead, 1934). They owe their nature to the fact that human beings interact in terms of symbols, the most important of which is contained in language. A symbol does not simply stand for an object or event: it defines them in a particular way and indicates a response to them. In this instance the symbol "menstruation" indicates a line of action: that is the flow of blood from the female private part. It should be said that symbols are human made and refer not to the intrinsic nature of objects and events but to the ways in which people perceive them. This suggests that humans may not be genetically programmed to react to particular stimuli. For their survival they construct and live within a world of meaning. In this way human define both the stimuli and the response to them.

Mead (1934) further stated that the culture of a society suggests appropriate types of behaviour for particular social roles. For example through socialization process, in some cultures, a menstruating woman is forbidden from cooking during her period. In line with this, the menstruator will act accordingly with the expected behaviour in a particular role and with a presupposed notion or concept of self. Thus through the process of role taking, an individual develops the concept of self. The existence of culture and social roles does shape human behaviour to some extent. Besides, some roles are sexually and gender construed. Thus for the menstruator, her actions are being influenced by the attitudes and expectations dictated by the

social norms or beliefs. The individual and society are regarded as inseparable on the basis that the individual only becomes a human person in a social context. Individuals develop a sense of self which is a prerequisite for thought. Individuals learn to take up roles in line with symbols whose meanings are shared. Humans thus live in a world of symbols that give meaning and provide basis for human interaction (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald, 2004).

The Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature, which is a major feature of a traditional society. In other words, the realm of interpersonal relationship, socio-economic, political ideologies and practices in such society are up-shot of men's worldview and ways of doing things. Sexuality and gender interpretation are not exceptional. Patriarchy is simply a structure of a set of social relations, a system of stratification on the basis of sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females.² Monagan (2010) termed this as the 'invisible hand' of patriarchy; that is a privileged social status for the utmost benefit of males. Substantiating the extent of patriarchal domination in sexual terms, Monagan alludes to the phenomenon of female genital mutilation; which is perpetuated for the holistic benefit of male/men folk through the religious, biological (scientific) and cultural essentialism.

Furthermore, Monagan makes reference to the vital force theory (from a scientific point of view) which holds that since energy could neither be created nor destroyed, the amount of finite energy in humans must be geared towards specific tasks such that in the case of women, especially menstruating women or 'menstruators'; energy should not be expended on education, rather to be diverted to the reproductive development of woman (female) in the main. Though this theory is not nonsensical, it is in some way crude, objectifying the essence of women in reproductive terms only. It proffers a limit to understanding what make women 'human' in similitude to what makes men in the same sense, 'human'. The practicability of such theory perhaps vied in the 1970s when sex differences were used to argue that women should not become airline pilots since they will be hormonally unstable once a month and therefore unable to perform their duties effectively as men (Rogers, 1999).

Reactions discerned fit to such thoughts or understanding about women in such conditions needs to be critically examined, and most importantly within the web of the social reality and intricacy that informs such. Albeit, there are likely to be other factors not necessarily social based that may inform such understanding. In the light of this, it is imperative to reflect rationally on the phenomenon of menstruation as a medium of sexual cum social conditioning of women's role and status within the Nigerian society. This would be done from a general point of view pervasive in this society; an issue that is yet to receive enough consideration for intellectual engagement. Scholars' reflection on the phenomenon of menstrual cycle indicates that it is an activity or phenomenon attributed with the notion of shame, insinuating the feelings/psyche of inferiority among menstruating women, who are conceived as the category of 'other' in a male dominating society.

As Bartky (1990) hints, it evokes the distressed apprehension of oneself (the woman-self, in this context) as a lesser creature. In Nigeria, this psyche or understanding is also sustained. Adebayo (2007) informs that prominent among Yoruba of South Western Nigeria

²Aina Olabisi cited in Makama, Godiya Allanana, 2013. Patriarchy and gender inequality in Nigeria: The way forward. *European Scientific Journal* Vol.9: 17, p.116.

is the vicious attribution towards women in menstrual conditions. He states;

In Yoruba land, a woman in menstruation is considered dangerous and as such she is not allowed to go to farm because if she does, she could damage crops and if she enters a poultry or animal farm, she could cause them to abort. Her presence in any ritual sacrifice could make it unacceptable and could render any charm ineffective. (Adebayo, 2007)

Adebayo's observation simply implies that among the Yoruba of Nigeria, menstrual cycle is conceived as a dysfunctional interlude in social livelihood and order. Perhaps this cycle convey a social implication that women in such states be tagged as agent of contamination, disruption, filth in matters of purification for human or social/natural balance. Thus, it connotes an idea of ascribed 'dirtiness' on 'menstruators'; subduing their relevance and role in the society.

In similar stance, Familusi (2012) focusing on Yoruba women in menstrual condition and the conception of their relevance in religious activities hints that; specifically during the rites of offering sacrifices to *Obatala* – Yoruba divinity of fertility and other religious activities, menstruating women are disallowed from entering any sacred places. Familusi informs that this prohibition or taboo is due to the belief that menstrual period is a period of impurity or defilement and thus could render the essence of *Obatala's* divinity, which is synonymous to whiteness/purity impure. Also, it would render the objects of appeasement ineffective or unaccepted by the divinity. For Familusi, this taboo attributed to the menstrual conditions of women impresses on the status of women in a way, as being unclean and reduce their relevance in religious activities among the Yoruba. The Yoruba also have superstition and myth to corroborate the extent for which the status of women should be subdued, apropos the phenomenon of menstruation.

Luisah (2000) delivers an interesting account of such superstition and myth regarding the evolution of menstrual cycle among women in Yoruba thoughts. Luisah implicitly questions the myth surrounding the tale of *Olofi, Ode* and *wife*³ that suggests menstrual symbolism in Yoruba women as a phenomenon of curse stating that; 'like the story of the Garden in Eden, we have a male God who creates woman with a curious mind, who puts her in a powerless position, and who punishes her for using her mind by attacking her body. Needless to say I neither trust nor respect this tale'. On the basis of menopausal effect in women, one would also be inclined to agree with Luisah that the myth remains unfounded as the incidence of cessation of menstrual flow in Yoruba women, typical of women all around world, is not accounted for. I agree to the extent that it is not enough to hinge on myths

³The story of *Olofi, Ode* and *Ode's* wife goes thus: *Olofi*, a supposed deity or patron for *Ode* were bound by a covenant of secrecy in which the former aided the latter in draining the blood of every animal or games hunted. *Ode*, in turn took the animals' home to his wife, who prepared them for meals. However, due to persistent refusal by *Ode* to reveal the source of getting the blood of the games drained whenever the wife inquired; the wife plotted a means by trailing *Ode* on one of the expedition to the place where *Olofi* normally appeared and then drained the blood. *Olofi*, being clairvoyant and omnipresent, discovered the woman in her hiding place and then placed a curse of menorrhoea upon her since she was so curious to see blood. This marked the beginning of menstrual cycle among Yoruba women according to the myth. See Luisah, Teish. 2000. Shedding old Skin: A search for new origin stories. In *Metarformia: A Journal of Menstruation and Culture*, Oriki Publications Oakland, Ca, pp. 4-5.

surrounding conception of menstrual flow to advocate or express the subjugation of women in the society.

Among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, the cyclical occurrence of menstruation generates certain myths and superstitions (Umeora and Egwuatu, 2008). It is important to hint that mythico-superstitious beliefs are attributed to the phenomenon of menstruation in this part of Nigeria though the focus here lies in how this situate the place of women-menstruators in this society. Umeora and Egwuatu (2008) have detailed that among the Igbo people, menstrual flow when not handled discreetly and carefully by women menstruator, is an invite to dangerous happenstances like witchcraft, rituals, internal heat and change in skin colour, infestation of rodents and snakes, cancer as well as infertility.

This suggests that spiritual implications are attached to the phenomenon of menstrual cycle in Igbo society. As regards the place/role of 'menstruators' in the society, Umeora and Egwuatu (2008) notes in specific terms, that among the Ebonyi Ibo for instance, menstrual conditions seem not to involve any connotation for the social subordination of women, as most of the restrictions were indeed self-imposed. By implication, it means the women discern their role and place in the society. However, it is not certain that the case is as it seems. This is simply because these women's belief and attitudes in this regard, is invariably a product of Igbo social beliefs, norms and expectation. As such it could be stated that women in this category have in a sense internalized the Igbo socio-cultural worldviews as regards the condition of menstruation; even when other factors like lack of pre-menarcheal sensitization and uncritical assimilation of certain socio-cultural beliefs may be adduced as the rationale of such course of action (that is self-imposition). Umeora and Egwuatu (2008) affirm this when they hinted that cogent traditional norm/codes were catalyst for such sense of self imposition among Igbo women in some villages. They noted that:

In one of the villages, menstruating women were not allowed to visit a particular section of the village stream for fear of contamination of the stream or to attend traditional gathering especially where village court trials were in session and judgement were pending.

One could discern that there is a convergence between the Igbo and Yoruba worldviews of menstrual cycle in women. And this is that both exhibit a social construction of menstruation/'menstruators' (women) as a phenomenon of contamination/dirtiness. This notion is further accompanied with a stigmatized attribution of vices such as evil spirit/witchcraft and disruption of order in natural course (infertility) in Igbo land. Consequently, this informs the severance of women in such conditions from socialization and disqualification from intimate interactions due to the supposed vicious beliefs held. Indeed, the assertion that it confers restriction in the social life, place and role of a woman in this sense is not mistaken and the suspicion that it impacts negatively on womanhood psychologically, debasing their self-image and self-esteem, precipitating a feeling of shame and undermining the physiological significance of the phenomenon seems on point (Umeora, Egwuatu, 2008).

Nigeria, being a heterogeneous society, is not only shaped by the predominance of formed (cultural) beliefs; the intrusion of external religious influences also informs such attribution. As a secular state, it exhibit Judeo-Christian and Arab-Islamic stance. Such stance

include the Jewish induction about women in menstrual condition as contained in the biblical verses of Leviticus 15: 19-30 that declares women as unclean (for seven days rather than till the evening of the commencement of seminal discharge as in the case of men), in matter of interaction with others, thus forbidding any form of association with women in such condition.⁴ In similar light, Al Qaradwi notes that among the Arabs, “menstruators” were usually left isolated or indirectly ostracized till after the period of menstruation.⁵ The Arab-Islamic stance is pervasive in the social enclave of Northern Nigeria.

Regarding the Northern sub-regions of Nigeria, little information is available in terms of the extent to which the phenomenon of menstrual cycle is socially construed by the predominance of religio-cultural outlook. However, much has been implied on the nature of menstrual hygiene and impact for reproductive health within the regions, specifically North Eastern and North Western states like Sokoto and Kano.⁶ The dearth of information is due to the fact that issues such as menstruation are not openly discussed in these regions (Oche *et al.*, 2012). Albeit, via multistage sample techniques conducted by Oche *et al.*, among secondary school adolescent girls on menstrual health and hygiene management in the regions, it has been noted that parent-mothers are the immediate source of interpretation and understanding of menarche in Northern Nigeria.

Beliefs propelled by religion (predominantly, Islamic) that foster some sort of social prohibitions remain another primary factor as women/girls during menstrual cycle avoid congregating in prayer centres (due to the social construe of menstruation as a state of uncleanliness). This attitude seems typical of Islamic (Muslim) communities across the world,⁷ Northern Nigeria being a predominant Islamic community in similar manner. Oche *et al.*, also makes it clear that the attitude, belief and practice attached to absorbent menstrual cycle materials like burning menstrual pads or clothing (which is believed could cause infertility or cancer infection) in South Eastern Nigeria (among the Igbo), does not hold sway in Northern Nigeria. The fact that there are medical/health reasons for the proscription of engagement in intercourse during menstrual conditions like discomfort, distortion of sexual organ functioning during discharge that could lead to blood loss, infection or swelling, notwithstanding is granted.

This is simply due to the belief in the region that such materials are not to be disposed indiscriminately as this may attract witches and other persons who could use the blood for rituals. Though they pontificate a difference in view about menstrual materials in the two regions; nevertheless, it stipulates a common ground that this phenomenon is conceived as an arbiter of undesirable course of events that disrupt natural or social order in entirety; discerning it as a symbolic omen for extra-ordinary occurrences.

⁴See Leviticus 15: 19-33, *New Jerusalem Bible* (1990 Edition), London: Darton, Longman & Todd, pp.107-108.

⁵Al-Qaradwi cited in, Adebayo, Rafiu Ibrahim. 2007. The religious and marital implication on menstruation. *Anyingba Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* Vol.III: No. 1: 21, p.21.

⁶See Oche, M.O, Umar A.S, Gana, G.J and Ango, J.T. 2012. Menstrual health: The unmet needs of adolescent girls in Sokoto, Nigeria. *Nigeria Scientific Research and Essays* Vol.7 (3), pp.410-418; Lawan, Umar Munammed, Nafisa, Wali Yusuf and Aisha, Bala Musa. 2010. Menstruation and menstrual hygiene amongst adolescent school girls in Kano North Western Nigeria. *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 14(3): pp.201-208; Vaughn, Jacqueline Grace 2013. A review of menstruation hygiene management among school girls in Sub-Saharan Africa. Mph. Thesis. The University of North Carolina; Chapel Hill, NC.

⁷See also Ten, Varina Tjon A. 2007. Menstrual hygiene: a neglected condition for the achievement of several MDGs; Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA). *Report Impressum* 8:6, http://www.eepa.be/wcm/dmdocuments/Bg_Paper_Menstrual-Hygiene.pdf.

While granting that this is a consequence of religio-cultural perspective of the enclave, realizing that this is unduly patriarchal motivated with the ultimate aim of placing women in the region at the lowest ebb of social status, identity and recognition cannot be treated lightly.

Scholars have equally interrogated menstruation among others like child conception in women as the basis of conceptualizing women and ascribing roles, which determines the status of women in the society. The argument that such social construe is an aberration of human equality and accountability⁸ has been made. This argument invariably interrogates and raises questions about the basic assumptions (religious, biological, cultural or social) of what is conceptualized as expected roles or status of woman in such specific condition or situation like menstruation. Some of these questions include those that inquire why a woman should not express the will for/choice of sexuality, sexual roles or status during menstruation (Derek 1986 ;Werner 1985) the morale behind exceptions from religious centers or social interaction during the menstrual period.⁹ The implication of the argument about the phenomenon and condition of women during menstruation is simply that it is a social construe, which discerns the place of women as regards their status as well as ascription of roles within the society during such condition; a condition that tends to relegate and subdue the women as the 'other' through the conceptualization of their sexuality as one of dirtiness and shame. Hence, exempting them from equal privileges and rights of participation, autonomy and choice.

However, there are curious questions that border on the general attribution of shame or dirtiness to the event of menstrual cycle in women and there is a reason to argue that this social construction; not borne directly out of health or medical motives, is unjustifiable; even on the basis of serving as a deterrent to ensure the perpetuation of the good health conditions of women. This kind of social construction misinterprets and misinform about the sexuality of women, hence it manipulates the notion of the essence of woman as a whole, subjecting the status and role ascription to a second-order to those of men, extending to the inability to exercise autonomy, choice, and association as well as the capacity for desirable interest. Menstruating women in this context thus become far removed from being an authentic human, a *sine qua non* to the notion of disgust, shame, and misfit for social interaction and relations. It is in this sense that ascribed dirtiness to menstruators in Nigeria renders them disadvantaged in participatory roles in social circles, politics, family, religion and economy. This simply reinforces the elevation of the masculine ego in these domains of life, casting looks on the female women as the "leaking women".¹⁰ This is suggestive of the social construe of the women as either an abnormal or imperfect human species; a manner of expression in Aristotle's term of the woman as the "mutilated male".¹¹

⁸See <http://fwyyw.submission.org/women/politics.html>.

⁹See Ali, Muhammed. 1973. *The Religion of Islam*, Lahore, AQhmediyyah, Anjuman, Isha'at Islam, pp.322-29. Muhammed Ali maintained here that in Islam, the state of menstruation is not a state of impurity, thus women in such state could handle the Quran and enter the Mosque (religious center).

¹⁰This is a proximate equivalence of the informal attribution (derogatory) to menstruating women among the Yoruba; who are fond of uttering 'o n sepo' – a figurative expression that means a woman is menstruating but which literally implies 'a leaking woman'.

¹¹Aristotle cited in Learner, G. 1989. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

IMPLICATION FOR WOMEN'S ROLE IN DEVELOPMENT

The notion of development has been construed diversely. Often times the techno-scientific and economic notion of development has been canvassed alongside the holistic notion of defining development as people-oriented or man-centered (Akinwale 2005; Opafola 1997). This implies that a social setting in pursuit of development must be able to count on its members' performances to contribute adequately to social functioning (Parson, 1971). The emphasis of members' performance in this sense connotes expectations of equal contributions to the quest of development. Within the context of this discourse, development has to do with the transformation of the entire society through total mobilization of every member of the society irrespective of sex and gender; a kind of development that is opposed to any form of obstacle whether political, economic or sociological in the process of transformation (Ezegbe, Akubue 2012). By extension, the emphasis here is that development of a nation like Nigeria, should not hinge on an imbalance social (power) relations that is gender-stereotyped, that is a probable reconstruction of the patriarchal structure of the society should be enhanced.

As it is beyond the intent of this discourse to exhaust the notion of development in terms of theories/approaches to development, it is thus essential to hint precisely the implications of the roles of women in development in Nigeria, given the social construction attached to the physiological process such as menstruation in women. Several works though from varying point of views have accessed this concern (Okoyeuzu, Obiamaka, Onwumere 2012; Fapohunda, 2012). Importantly, given the social construe of the menstrual phenomenon as a dirty one, which is one of the factors that informs the subordinated positioning of women has not been interrogated within the context of impact or roles in development. To this extent, I hint briefly below the implication that such social construe discern normative role for women in the Nigerian society, which advances a minimal as well as subordinate engagement in the course of development. Simply put, the implications are as below:

- It (the social construe) objectifies women as a subordinate 'other'
- It stifles women's discretion in matters of roles since it creates a standard of expectations; as such for any otherwise roles performed by a woman, it is likely conceived deviant or exceptional
- It affixes an identity of the women as a subject of social stigma with the impressed attribution of dirtiness and shame.
- Consequently, it condition women's' participation in the quest for development of their self, community, state or nation.

The question that recurs is, 'to what extent can one argue for an equitable contribution of men and women in the quest of development in such a society like Nigeria, where this sort of social construction is constant? Perhaps, one can in a way agree with Koyama that the sum of our small rebellions combined 'will' would destabilize the normative gender system as we know it.¹² Regarding whether the attempt in this discourse constitute such 'rebellion' is another leap of concern for further research.

¹²Emi Koyama cited in Chis, B. 2010. *New blood: Third-wave feminism and the politics of menstruation*. USA: Rutgers University Press, p.154.

CONCLUSION

The attempt above has made efforts to engage the social construction of women sexuality via the phenomenon of menstrual cycle that is conceived or supposed as a dirty and shameful occurrence, specifically within a brief consideration of the worldviews and practises of major ethnic groups of Nigeria. Subjecting this to the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, I reverberate in the work that these worldviews condition women in subordinate terms, as the ridiculed and relegated 'other' in Nigeria, a nation that is overtly established on a patriarchal basis. The work against this background has argued that this social construe is an unjustifiable stance that amounts to an aberration of the equality of humans and by implication it subjugate and stifles women's equal contribution to holistic development since their sexuality is stereotyped for expected (controlled) roles and status. This suggest that further socio-philosophical theorizing needs to be rendered on this issue for subsequent understanding of what it means for women to be equally considered as 'human' in their exercise of choice or autonomy in matters of social relation, interaction, gender and sexuality.

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