

# Comparative Analysis of Use of Woman Imagery in Painting: An Overview of Four Selected Artists and their Works.

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**Abstract-** *The trust of this paper is to draw a comparative analysis of the use of woman imagery in painting by four selected artists. What are their focus and motivations as observed by some art historians who sees women as the “veritable symbol of life”, that they represent continuity and stability and are the hope of the human race, (Campbell, 1993). Hence, they are over the years, favourite subjects of the visual, verbal and literary artists all over the world. The woman imagery has served as a vehicle of aesthetic communication to depict social strata using colour in harmonious tones. The woman confronts the artist with general reality through studio practice to bring out a new mode of expression yet making allegorical statements about humans, their environment and their interconnectedness.*

**Keywords:** *Woman, Artist, Painting, Imagery, Aesthetic, Subject, Allegory.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is the womenfolk who have inspired artists from time immemorial. Zaka (2025) opines that women are considered to have been shaped by religious practices, cultural norms, and societal expectations. Moreover, artists who are also part of society are mostly inspired by women’s reflections shaped by society.

However, some of the notable expression of images of women in painting are of ‘Love and Life’ George Frederic Watts (1893); ‘Before the Performance’ (fig. 1), Edgar Degas (1896-98); ‘Spirit of the Dead Watching’ (fig. 2), Paul Gauguin, (1892); ‘Sisi Ologe1’ Kolade Oshinowo, (2012); ‘Black is beautiful’ (fig. 3) of Negritude series (1971) Benjamin Enwonwu. “My women are simple, honest creatures who are troubled with nothing past their physical occupations...It is as if you were looking through an eyehole” – Degas.

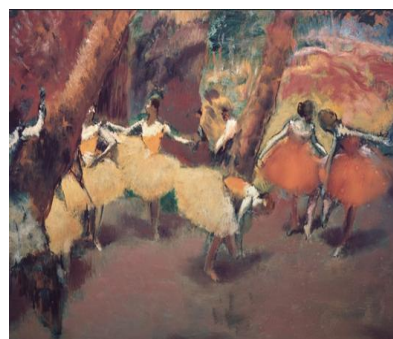


Fig. 1

Artist: Edgar Degas

Title: “Before the Performance” 1896-98.

Medium: oil on canvas

Dimension: 46.7x62.9cm

Courtesy: wikiart.org

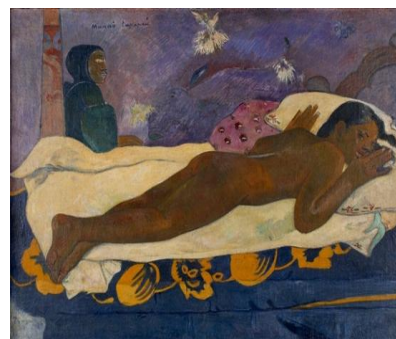


Fig. 2

Artist: Paul Gauguin

Title: “Spirit of the Dead Watching” 1892.

Medium: oil on jute mounted on canvas

Dimension: 46.7x62.9cm.

Courtesy: buffaloakg.org

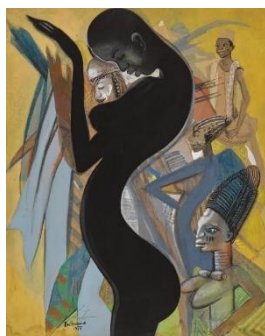


Fig. 3

Artist: Ben Enwonwu  
Title: Negritude series  
Medium: Water colour  
Dimension: 46.7x62.9cm  
Courtesy: ko-artspace.com

The interrogation of the woman form confronts the artist with general reality through practice to bring out a new mode of expression, yet making allegorical statements about humans, their environment and their interconnectedness. These artists sought a simple way of visual exploration, by condensing their ideas in ways that reflect their thoughts and understanding of a woman, and at the same time reflects their opinion of the person of the woman. Who she is, her social role as a home maker and the one who continue the circle of life. This paper looks at these artists in the order in which they are presented without prejudice to who comes first and at conclusion attempts were made to draw out similarities and differences between them and their practice.

#### Kolade Oshinowo (b.1948)

The use of female subject is a universal one and it has been so through the ages. The female is endowed with a form that is as complex as it is beautiful. The woman also adds to her beauty by wearing various forms of headgear and adding accessories such as ear rings, neck, laces and bangles of various sizes and materials. The female body represents the beauty and challenges of womanhood and motherhood. These I try to capture in my paintings. – (Kolade Oshinowo in Jerry, 2013).

The subject of women for artistic articulation and expression in his painting is noticeable in elegance rendering when one considers the way through which he handles the subject matter. Every work of his in this review reflects a celebration of womanhood. This is a

sharp contrast from women forms of de Kooning's Woman 111, 1953 (see fig. 8). His exhibition of 2012 could be described as "Celebration of Womanhood". The woman element dominated most of the works here and could be seen as an expression of socio-cultural influences of the artist's immediate environment. The energy of his works, the strength of forms and lines, elegance and colour are knitted together in a unified entity. Oloidi (2012), observes that Oshinowo imageries are "well fed with profuse ornamentation through multi-variety of organic and geometrical patterns and aquatic formations that are integral to the fabric used in compositional materials...a parade of greatly linear vermicular or warmly, rosette and floral visual imageries that are a departure from the artist's known creative formalism".

Oshinowo is drawn to exploring interaction and connectedness of every strand of the society viewed from the artist's lens, depicting every woman in elegant and superlative postures that celebrates their person, taste, desires and form. John Oyedemi 2012 series on 'women' compared with Oshinowo in this review rather shows them in daily activity of the object of their trade in another environment. It is apparent in Oshinowo's painting; the woman despite her daily chores is attired in a colorful decorative material. His design elements are well expressed in calm pictorial composition, un-riotous organization and unaggressive. He also developed a painstaking approach that gives attention to detail, in the exploration of feminist form. The exploration of this kind opened up the understanding of the place of artistic appreciation of feminine form which carry intrinsic meaning and communicate physical realities. The thematic choice gives credence to Oshinowo's quest in celebrating feminist in these two paintings. According to Buhari, "Oshinowo's female figures are the glorification of the woman. Her figure symbolizes elegance, beauty, motherhood, dignity, home maker, and more". (fig. 4, Sisi Ologe 1, 2012 and fig. 5, Discussion 2012). In contrast with what is obtainable outside the African culture, he sees the western art culture as using the female subject as an object of gaze and desire as seen in the work of Pablo Picasso under review (Kleiner and Mamiya, 2005).





Fig. 4

Artist: Kolade Oshinowo

Title: Sisi Ologe,

Year: 2012

Medium: mixed –media

Dimension: 122x91cm

Courtesy: Artist



Fig. 5

Artist: Kolade Oshinowo

Title: Discussion,

Year: 2011

Medium: mixed –media

Dimension: 122x122cm

Courtesy: Artist

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)

“Everyone wants to understand art, why don't we try to understand the song of a bird? Why do we love the night, the flowers, and everything around us without trying to understand them? But in the case of a painting, people think they have to understand ...people who try to explain a picture usually bark up the wrong tree.” - Pablo Picasso

This is a statement by one of the most liberal of dexterous artists in modern art history, having gone through periods of experimentation in different media in articulating his expression and feelings. His proficiency in handling media was well noticed as early as 1894, a display of unusual talent of his age. His concept development started with copying the old masters, imitating their style and this resulted in formulating a personal idiom.

By 1906 Picasso was searching relentlessly for new ways to depict form because he felt art should evolve and develop through practice. This attitude has helped in the understanding of experimentations and has influenced other artists. His quest for innovation led him from one style to another which is expressed in a wide range of visual expressions. Picasso's fragmentation of forms in space was influenced by ancient Iberian and African sculpture and by the paintings of Paul Cezanne. This birthed a new move and a point of departure from careful presentation of visual reality. He dissected the female form into a continuous optical spread, many constituent features which he then recomposed in a new logic of design and into a coherent aesthetic object. This attitude has helped in understanding of visual experimentation in the studio and has influenced wide range of visual expressions.

“Le Demoiselles d'Avignon” (1906), (fig. 6), is a fragmentation of women forms. This influenced the birth of cubism movement in 1908. Cubism emerged from the depiction of a composition of shapes and forms abstracted in an all-over effect that unifies each component in space. The painting is rendered in flat design made up of five rigid nudes (probably regarded as prostitutes in a brothel) and fluttering draperies spread over them. Noticeable are their faces which are

of assemblage of Negro masks traceable to influence of Iberia marks. A critical view of this work shows the use of human anatomy as simple raw-materials; limbs, breasts and faces are handled with a sense of proficiency and freedom. The original identity no-longer matters, breasts may turn into eyes, profile merge with frontal views, shadows become substance resulting in an endless flow of metamorphoses. This mode of expression has also influenced other artists like Piet Mondrian and Georges Braque. This exploration marked the voyage of creative force that naturally engage viewers in painting, in an inquisitive situation and become part of the interrogators of the work (Kleiner and Mamiya, 2005). The works produced were beyond description of realities, composed colours, rigid lines and limited palette.



Fig. 6

Artist: Pablo Picasso  
Title: Les Femmes d'Alger (O Version O)  
Year: 1906  
Medium: Oil on Canvas  
Dimension: 243.9 x 233.7 cm  
Courtesy: Wikipedia.org

The second painting of Pablo Picasso on review is “The Weeping Woman” (fig. 7). It is a series of oil on canvas painting by Picasso, the last of which was created in 1937. He adopted the image of Dora Maar, his mistress and muse. The paintings were produced with focus on the figure of a grieving woman, representing the universal anguish caused by conflict. (Richardson, 2017). Created in the aftermath of his monumental anti-war mural “Guernica” which he executed in response to the bombing of Guernica in the Spanish civil war. The creative force of emotion lies in its violent visual fragmentation. Picasso deconstructs the woman’s face using sharp, jagged lines and acidic, complimentary colours of vivid

yellows, greens, red and purple, that seems to convey psychological distress as much as physical form. (Cowling, 2002). Her eyes, wide and overflowing with teardrops, her mouth wrenched and toothy, is pressed against a handkerchief in a gesture which suggests both suppression and uncontrollable sobbing.



Fig. 7

Artist: Pablo Picasso  
Title: The Weeping Woman  
Year: 1937  
Medium: Oil on Canvas  
Dimension: 61 x 50cm  
Courtesy: Wikipedia.org

Willem de Kooning (1904-1997)

Willhem de Kooning is an abstract expressionist and a notable figure of the New York art School. He was said to have started exploring and painting women regularly in the 1940s and reached a climax by 1950. Women are thought to be the symbol of beauty, glory and fertility and the artist’s representation of them are graceful and delicate though with some few exceptions. One of his works being reviewed is titled “Woman 111” executed in 1953, (fig. 8), it is one in a series of six paintings done by de Kooning. It is characterized by energetic brush strokes and twisted forms which created a dialogue between human imagery and abstraction where figures are depicted in



an almost graffiti-like style, with gigantic, vacuous eyes, massive breasts, toothy smiles and clawlike hands set against colourful layers of paint. The woman, described as “shameless erotic” painted with torrents of dripping pigments, created vibrant fabric of colour” (Selz, 1981). This series shows single figures on each canvas in an imposing framework of angular shapes concealing violently distorted figure with exaggerated female features (breasts and lips). His women series though gruesome as it may is not totally abstract but combinations of various elements boldly outlined. The deliberate vulgarity and provocative figures are in contrast with the representation of women by other artists being featured in this article. Also, the violent calligraphic tendencies display of women in de Kooning is at variance with Oshinowo’s paintings on women executed in 2012.

Every stroke of his is aggressive, a gesture likely of violence towards the female body. The gestural brush strokes and energetic application of dark pigment of colours to outlined the figure, presents de Kooning as a man that had been hurt by a woman in some way and trying to push his emotions on canvas. His painting, a fragmentation in the cubist mannerism, instead of progressing from figuration to abstraction was the other way round. It was reported that his wife Elaine testified that he was never satisfied with a concept, and that there are approximately 200 scraped-away images on a canvas before the final one. Other noticeable features in his paintings are wide swaths of colour, densely congested canvas with brush strokes, lyrical loops and twisting line colours in a close-up study that achieves immediate encounter with no depth. (Kleiner and Mamiya, 2005).



Fig. 8

Artist: Willem de Kooning

Title: woman 111

Year: 1953

Medium: oil on canvas

Size: 173 x 123 cm

Courtesy: willem-de-kooning.org

De Kooning's painting “Woman” (fig. 9) executed in 1948, is the first major surviving painting from his second *Woman* series, during the same period as his black-and-white abstractions. His aggressive distortion of the figure is unparalleled in his earlier figurative works, he swiftly applied paint strokes simultaneously defining the subject and dissolving it. As with previous paintings, the effect of pictorial immediacy contradicts the complex methods that went into the work's production. While this appears to be a rapid, spontaneous rendering, investigation shows that de Kooning worked on it in stages and selected and exploited his materials to underscore his imagery.



Fig. 9

Artist: Willem de Kooning

Title: "Woman"

Year: 1948

Medium: oil on enamel

Size: 136.2 x 113.3cm

Courtesy: Smithsonian Institution Washington.

John Oyedemi (b 1967)

An impressionist and conceptual artist, and of late, his works centered on the environment. John Oyedemi captures charcoal market spaces where interactions usually occur. The overwhelming influence of black subsumed the environment to a point of no colour. It is in this environment that women folk especially in Africa who are an epitome of hard work are found. They are said to often bear a heavier burden in multiplicity of roles and only complimented by their children. Woman motif is represented in this series as a theme because it is the major symbol common in the charcoal business that expresses a socio-cultural climate, emphasizing the physical labour of the people of our nation. It is also the conceptualization of this idea that encapsulates the society into a whole to depict human struggle for survival. (figs. 10 and 11).



Fig. 10

Artist: John Oyedemi

Title: The Woman 1,

Year: 2012

Medium: Oil on Canvas

Size: 130 x 110cm

Courtesy: Artist

In "The Woman 1" (fig. 10), three women are delicately enveloped, they are etched surface on the surface of the canvas, as if to suggest crack in a subtle scheme. This configuration brings the surface of the painting to align with the composition in which the gestural calmness of abstract expression integrates vertical and horizontal lines submerged together in harmony. The canvas is rendered in gray and roughly textured to suggest inability to have what to show for the role players struggle for survival. Compositionally, the women are represented in elegant poses in their daily activities (charcoal market) fashioned to live with the black bags.

The work embodies the philosophy of labour, which is captured in colour and lines. It depicts the drama of ordinary scenes of women doing their daily chores of bagging the future (charcoal). The image of a tree is placed behind the women in a perspective to represent the source of their business. The strength of this composition stems from linear rhythms that encloses the figures and at the same time fragments them. The linear attribute of this is evident influences of other artists especially the cubist approach of fragmentation.



Sombre quality patterns represent her pattern of life; it is created by overlapping planes in space as a result of use of charcoal motif. These visual vocabularies are coded with images that communicate messages yet creating aesthetic appeal in a dynamic rhythm of relationship.



Fig. 11

Artist: John Oyedemi

Title: The Woman 11,

Year: 2012

Medium: Oil on Canvas

Size: 130 x 110cm

Courtesy: Artist

A variety of languages of abstract relationship is employed to make visual statements about the women, lyrical rendering of a woman fills the entire picture plane. In “The Woman 11” (fig. 11), the figure is shown in a posture that depicts movement. The fluidity of lines is used to capture the essence of her activities by the web of arc, diagonal, vertical and horizontal structures. This modulation of colour gives a picture of charcoal market in a symbolic manner. It reflects interest in the usage of black to capture the activities of charcoal market with large colour area, dots, subtle diagonals, human life and organic growth treating them in linear form. A floating sensation of light, white sparkle creates evanescent quality on all the

canvas in this series. The foreground and background are tied together in a geometric configuration, dark outlines and simplified shapes.

This spatial construction is achieved through negative and positive planes separated by bands of lines. The motif of bowls is overlapped with repeated and speckle of black on gray at the foreground. The mid-ground is separated by mainly value while the top is black dominated only connected by the two figures with the one on the right sitting with part of the body subsumed in the dark ground. Each segment of the painting occupies a monochromatic expression suggesting everyday life of the women in business. It is a representation of the underlining strength of women through their resilience, independence and adaptation to any situation.

## CONCLUSION

The differences in the works of these four artists were influenced by artistic currents of their times and the individual experiences in the environment. Human experiences cannot be understood separately from the environment in which they occur. More so we live in a world with historically specific multitude of visual stimulus in our daily environment (Leavy, 2009). Artists symbolically represents the woman figure to mean what they understood of them; an important distinction is the way they are projected. Pablo Picasso sees a woman as a sex icon in a brothel displaying a character of seduction to her client and to be seen from a multiple view. The cultural background of Kolade Oshinowo influences his art. The cosmopolitan nature of his environment is observed in the way his concept of women is depicted as socialite and psychedelic. More importantly, the women are adorned in colourful attires. In comparison with these two afore mentioned artists, Willem de Kooning displayed aggressiveness towards the woman. He mutilated her body with strong swirls dark lines representing her as an ugly being. She looks suffocated in the background without clear distinction. In contrast John Oyedemi represented the woman as a hard-working African who labours in a sombre environment to make ends meet. Her environment is perceived to typify what day-to-day living is for many who labour from day to day without anything much to show for it. The modern myth of human struggle for survival is evident in his paintings.

These four artists have distinctly depicted the woman as they encounter her and relate with her person.

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