

**THE GENDERED FURY: FEMALE MORAL AUTHORITY AND SATIRICAL VOICE IN HALIMA
AMALI'S *FACES OF SHAME***

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Abstract

Critiques of Halima Amali's *Faces of Shame* construe the collection principally as a form of protest poetry directed at the Nigerian political class. This interpretation, while instructive, is not sufficient. This study contend that the collection's protest remains incomplete if the gendered configuration of the moral authority from which it is articulated is not taken into consideration. Amali's protest through her female satirical voice, which is situated at the centre of the argument, is configured through the Islamic moral order. The researchers employ Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism and, through a close reading, attend to the collection's use of the tensions within the Islamic moral framework to position feminine outrage within a theological domain, as well as the collection's use of the tension between communal solidarity and individual witness. The researchers establish that *Faces of Shame* is a collection that extends beyond a protest against corruption in Nigeria. It is a collection in which a female voice, situated at the intersection of faith (Islam), gender (the feminine), and action (civic), asserts this voice as her moral authority and deserves to be recognised.

Keywords: Halima Amali, *Faces of Shame*, Stiwanism, female moral authority, a satirical voice, Nigerian women's poetry, Islam and gender

Introduction

A discerning reader of *Faces of Shame* is impelled to ask what has not been asked in any of the critiques of this collection. Namely, why does the fury in these poems feel different from the fury of Niyi Osundare or Odia Ofeimun or Tanure Ojaide, poets with whom Amali is clearly in conversation? They all refer to the same rapacious ruling class, the same eviscerated institutions, and the same supine, complicit victims who witness the undeserved debasement of themselves and others. The collection discloses the anatomy of the poetic failures of Nigerian protest poetry, with laboured metaphors and devices that register repetitions of failure. Although the Nigerian protest poetic devices and structures permeate the collection's

voice and form, the collection is preoccupied with the author's poetics and structures. It concentrates on the vantage point from which she is writing, and the perspective she is articulating.

Amali is an African literature professor at the Federal University of Lafia (Federal University of Lafia, 2024). In *Faces of Shame*, she deploys the female satirical perspective to conjoin Islamic morality and public civic adjudication. Because of her academic position, her gendered voice and her Islamic morality, she is positioned to occupy a distinctive place in Nigeria's protest poetry, which has been overwhelmingly male-dominated and male-centred. When the collection articulates anger toward the phenomenon of corruption, it is legitimated within the Islamic framework of accountability and social justice, which is a distinctive feature of protest poetry because it furnishes a theological rationale for the collection's anger. When the speaker invokes Munafiki, which refers to an individual who, in the context of Islamic hypocrisy, concurrently prays and perpetrates theft, the speaker is not deploying a hyperbolic religious metaphor. Instead, the poet is pronouncing a morally binding adjudication in a tribunal of ethics wherein the poet presumes an entitlement to judge and from which the poet expects judgement.

This paper construes *Faces of Shame* as a collection where the speaker's gender, religion, and citizenship are the analytic foreground instead of the biographical background. This paper's principal concerns are three questions. How does Amali fashion a voice that is satirical and feminine and which does not reside in the domestic and/or the private? How does Amali deploy Islamic moral authority to substantively anchor a critique that might otherwise be construed as purely a political critique? How does the collection grapple with the tensions, in most of the collection's poems, in the relationship between the individual and the collective 'we'? These questions are addressed through the close reading of selected poems from the collection, using Stiwanism as the principal analytic framework. The poems were selected because, among other considerations, they engage with the analytic preoccupations of a feminine voice of satire, Islamic moral authority, and the individual vs. collective referential oscillations.

Theoretical Background

This study employs the theory of Stiwanism as a constituent of its framework. Formulated by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, "Stiwanism" is an African feminist theory of social transformation. Ogundipe-Leslie's theory endeavours to address the social, economic, and cultural challenges confronting African women in ways that Western feminist theories do not. Stiwanism mobilises theories of gender relations and an African social transformation framework as an interpretive position for African women. Ogundipe-Leslie characterises the weight of the colonial and patriarchal legacies conjoined with poverty and the perpetuation of silences imposed on African women as a "sack" of social burdens (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, pp. 229-230). Stiwanism furnishes an analytic framework for the social and political encumbrances of women in Africa. It affords African women the opportunity to participate in politics irrespective of the social impediments and provides women with the capacity to use their political voice even in the absence of such a schema.

There are several reasons why the *Faces of Shame* analysis relies upon this theory. First, this theory does not require that female political pronouncements fit within a particular

construct of Western feminism. For example, a female Muslim from Northern Nigeria might formulate her political critiques by mobilising her own indigenous resources, and not necessarily a secular liberal idiom. Second, Stiwanism apprehends the social dimensions of personal experiences, and does not depend on the Western liberal feminist school's disaggregation of the personal and the political, whether in critique or otherwise. In the context of Amali's poetry, the speaker's Islamic faith and gender are mobilised, and the Islamic moral order is politically and socially inclusive of gender. Third, Ogundipe-Leslie's framework interrogates the question of voice: who speaks in the public sphere, and how. This issue is what *Faces of Shame* is chiefly concerned with, and what it negotiates in its own way.

A constraint of the theory is that Ogundipe-Leslie largely restricted her framework to prose fiction and cultural criticism, and did not account for how form may function in the construction of gendered moral authority in poetry. The analysis redresses this limitation by attending to the poems themselves, and elucidates how, through word choice, tone, persona, apostrophe, repetition, among others, a gendered speaker is constituted within the formal parameters of the poem.

Review of Literature

Interest is progressively expanding in the study of Amali's poetry. Nevertheless, the scholarship almost entirely overlooks the gendering of her poetry. In Niyi Akingbe's (2024) examination of the deployment of satire as confrontational language in contemporary Nigerian poetry, he traces the literary lineage of Amali's writing. Akingbe posits that Nigerian poets deploy satire as "a medium used to interrogate the states of affairs in societies" (p. 49) and that the Nigerian satirist is "a defender of communal norms and virtues" (p. 51). When examining Amali, this is instructive, especially in relation to her satirical practice. It furnishes an extensive genealogy of civic poetry. What Akingbe does not examine is poetry, for the most part, as a predominantly male preserve, and in circumstances where there is a woman speaker, the domain of the satirist's authority. Amali's collection resolves this question.

More germane to this case is Bartholomew Chizoba Akpah's (2020) analysis of satire, humour, and parody in 21st-century Nigerian women's poetry. Akpah employs the term "centripetal force to criticise amidst laughter, the ills of female devaluation in the society" (p. 133) to characterise how women poets deploy satire, humour, and parody to channel laughter in order to confront the social disqualification of women. In this context, Akpah evaluates the use of humour and satire in women's poetry as an intricate social critique of women's devaluation and a recognition of women's voice in the domain of women's rights, as well as women's advocacy in the sphere of intellectual discourse. Although the analysis concentrates on other poets, Amali is of consequence as Akpah comes close to illustrating the inventive and performative aspects of Nigerian women's poetry. The woman who wields satire establishes that she speaks from an elevated moral ground. In this regard, the dimension is strongly pronounced in *Faces of Shame* as Amali's satire is direct, incisive, and carries a high degree of responsibility and, as such, asserts the entitlement and space for the female voice in satire, which is still uncharted.

Egya's (2019) account of the dialogic character of contemporary Nigerian poetry also provides an incisive prism of analysis. Egya contends that third-generation Nigerian poets write dialogically, fashioning poems as responses to particular historical interlocutors such as

the Nigerian state, the aggrieved masses, and the protest poetry genre (p. 76). Amali's collection is dialogic in the sense that Egya describes, but in addition to that, it participates in a dialogue with patriarchal orthodoxies regarding who is allowed to speak on matters of public concern. When Amali deploys the incantatory plural 'we', she is not merely using a poetic convention that engenders a sense of community. She is advancing a claim to her entitlement to speak for the community, and this claim is justified, given that she is a woman from a context that is construed to place her in a subordinate position in the hierarchy of those who are authorised to speak on matters of public concern.

Onyebuchi Nwosu and Ose-Agbo (2025) advance a Marxist interpretation of Amali's poetry, describing it as "mass-oriented, confrontational, and optimistic" (p. 67). They maintain that her poetry contests anti-democratic forces. While a class analysis recognises the collection's appeal to the indigent and the comparatively impoverished, it does not accommodate the gendered and Islamic moral frameworks that condition how Amali situates her voice among men. Stiwanism repudiates the proposition that the political voice of the African woman is an undifferentiated voice. African female poets possess the capacity to register the political plurality of the social contexts within which they are positioned and the modes in which they enunciate their voices with authority.

Onyejizu (2024) advances a social transformation interpretation of Amali's poetry, expatiating on the collection's thematic preoccupations and the concerns regarding the endemic state of corruption and maladministration. The interpretation acknowledges Amali's use of satire; nevertheless, it fails to apprehend the social critique immanent in the collection's configuration of a moral order. This paper endeavours to close the gap that scholarship on Amali's poetry has created: what is Amali saying, who is Amali saying this to, and why does it matter?

Data Analysis

The analysis examines three interdependent dimensions of the collection: the constitution of a specifically female satirical voice, the deployment of Islamic categories as a theologically inflected foundation of feminist moral outrage, and the balancing act between individual testimony and collective solidarity.

The Female Satirical Voice

There is a recurrent tendency when identifying the speaker of Nigerian poetic satire to conceive of a character who is educated, politically engaged, male, and who, because of his gender and his access to the civic sphere, speaks from a locus of authority. Amali's *Faces of Shame*, from the very first poem, unsettles this. 'They Have No Shame' (Amali, 2020, p. 12) forthrightly enters the civic sphere without the circumspect positioning of one who is cognisant that she is transgressing the bounds of the conventional:

They walk high
Big chests out
Padded in billion naira notes

Snatched off the bullion van
For a deal in the looters' workshop

They laugh the laugh of jackals
Mouths agape
In celebration of successful outings
Defrauding the nation

For a build of monstrous homes of theft (Amali, 2020, p. 12)

The poem does not furnish an introduction. Instead, it begins in the midst of scrutiny in the register of one who has been scrutinising and pronouncing judgement, and has now determined that the time for restraint has passed. The authority that the poem commands is not derived from an institutional standing, nor is it legitimated by the exposition of a theory. The authority inheres in the immediacy of observation, the precision of the language, and the certitude of the moral judgement. 'They laugh the laugh of jackals' is not a self-qualifying assertion; it is a designation. The speaker discerns something she sees, then calls it out, all without seeking permission to do so.

According to Akingbe (2024), the Nigerian tradition's satirist functions as the community's custodian, a protector of the community's voice who safeguards the community's norms against their transgressors (p. 51). In 'They Have No Shame' (Amali, 2020, p. 12), the speaker also inhabits this space, but does so from a gender standpoint that this tradition does not associate with this kind of public, unapologetic ethical assertion. Stiwanism foregrounds the full participation of African women within the domain of public space and public speech, and *Faces of Shame* does not advocate for this participation in theory, but enacts it in poetry, through each poem, through each pronouncement.

In "Strip Them Naked" (Amali, 2020, p. 13), comic and grave elements are conjoined. The poem concentrates on the manifold ways people laugh and speculate about the rationales behind the injunction. It rends these women apart:

Strip them naked
These women of pretentious faces
Wearing billion naira adornment
Concealing their pothole faces of theft
Thieves of great plethora
Strip them naked to our boo (Amali, 2020, p. 13)

Amali (2020) has a particular target in mind: women in a position of authority who are venal. A female speaker, stripping female adornment, is not performing a cross-gender gesture but a gesture within gender. Thus, this signifies how Amali's moral authority functions. In this context, she is not invoking the pretext of gender solidarity to afford women a free pass and is, in fact, exacting the same level of accountability from women in the civic sphere as she does from men. This is the substance of Stiwanism. The venal female public official, in Amali's view, is as naked in her shame as her male counterparts.

Islamic Moral Authority and the Grounds of Female Outrage

The theological dimension of *Faces of Shame* is what most clearly distinguishes it from other manifestations of Nigerian protest poetry. It is also what is most intimately related to the gender of the speaker. Drawing upon Islamic concepts, Amali deploys a female speaker whose moral lexicon is shaped by the Islamic moral paradigm. Poetic configurations of the Islamic moral paradigm are not merely rhetorical devices, but the substantive grounds on which the authority to judge inheres. This is consequential because it transforms the nature of the authority that is being asserted. It is neither the secular humanist authority of the enlightened intellectual, nor is it the class-based authority of the oppressed speaking against the oppressor. It is the theological authority, the authority of the individual who knows the moral law and who brings those who have transgressed the moral law to account before the moral law, the community, and God.

In 'Enemies of Our Time' (Amali, 2020, p. 22), corruption, impunity, theft, and rape, along with illiteracy, are the enemies of our time. These are construed as social maladies, but the persona construes them as moral problems that have theological consequences. Theft is described as 'Burrowing our treasury / Breeding unholy romance with our funds / In a marriage of lust and money / Castrating our hopes to decency / And deprivation reigns' (Amali, 2020, p. 22). Here, theft is shown as breeding unholy romance with our funds. The representation of theft in this fashion is not couched in the discourse of economics or politics. It is the language of Islamic moral theology, in which the violation of prescribed boundaries is not merely a material concern, but a violation of a theological order.

The poem "A Dream for My Nation" (Amali, 2020, p. 16) directs this theological configuration towards renewal. Amali writes in the optative mood and invokes a purification of the land:

May the dirt be washed
Off thieves and robbers
Unholy leaders, men and women of deceit
Established in theft
To bathe the bath of repentance (Amali, 2020, p. 16)

Here, the petition for repentance is an injunction to the morally decayed to be regenerated, not as a mercy, but as a prerequisite for civic renewal. In the Islamic conception of repentance, *tawba*, this is so. There is no *tawba* if there is no restitution. Thus, this demonstrates that the demand for the 'bath of repentance' is, in fact, a petition for a full moral restoration and not a perfunctory apology. This attests to the theological erudition of someone for whom the

Islamic moral order is a verity, and thus confers on the poem's ostensibly gentle optative a sterner moral imperative than it appears to have at first.

Part Five of the collection contains the most potent invocation of Islamic moral authority. Here, the term "Munafiki" occurs. Amali defines the term as 'an Arabic word for hypocrite' in a footnote. The Munafiki is a grave figure in Islamic theology. It denotes a person who outwardly professes to be a believer but inwardly does not. In fact, such hypocrisy is considered a graver transgression within the Islamic community because it corrodes the Islamic community from within, as opposed to being an avowed unbeliever. In "This Munafiki" (Amali, 2020, p. 20), when Amali indicts the ruling class of Nigeria, she is invoking a tribunal where the ruling class is accountable not to a constitutional or electoral authority, but to a divine authority. The charge is beyond reversal by any court of law, and no amount of appropriated wealth will be able to furnish immunity from it. It constitutes a particular kind of authority, which is a moral authority. It is a moral authority of the Islamic tradition accorded to women who are resolute in their convictions and speak from them. It is the authority of a female scholar, a preacher, and a community member.

Between I and We: Witness, Community, and the Grammar of Outrage

A salient feature of *Faces of Shame* is its use of pronouns. The collection moves back and forth between the first-person singular and the first-person plural 'we' as though such an alternation were a calculated feature. These alternations between the two first-person forms were not fortuitous, but rather carefully thought out and placed. Scrutinising these shifts in detail facilitates an exploration of how Amali positions her moral authority as a situated woman who speaks for herself and for her community.

"We Shall Sing" (Amali, 2020, p. 14) features almost entirely plural syntax and amalgamates disparate suffering into a singular, unified voice through a refrain at each phrase's commencement as follows:

We shall sing
Sing songs of sorrow
Expelling anguish from our hearts
In mountainous heights
Unto these men of merciless souls
Stepping on our souls
To erase our souls (Amali, 2020, p. 14)

Here, 'we' operates not as a poetic device, but as a political enunciation. The writer politically situates herself as a constituent of the plural community of those who suffer and writes from within rather than about it. This affords insight into the gendered authority she wields. She does not politically stand in a position external to the local plural community as the representative of the community. She stands in the community and embodies the plurality of the community while articulating the impulse to express the feeling of that plurality. What Egya calls the dialogic character in contemporary Nigerian poetry is analogous; but, with the dimension of gender incorporated, a woman who articulates in the plural first person, as she

does, participates in a public sphere that has not always socially accommodated recognition of her citizenship.

“I Want to Die,” written in the first-person singular, presents the antithetical extreme.

Pains hover in the air

Dripping unto the heads of the poor

Spreading painfully unto the souls of my nation

A creation of the haves to the downtrodden

Too much to bear

I want to die. (Amali, 2020, p. 41)

Amali depicts the community's collective suffering, and, personally, the speaker profoundly feels the community's suffering, too. ‘I want to die’ connotes an acute personal and individual anguish. ‘My nation,’ in contrast, articulates the community’s extreme collective suffering and a sense of personal possession. It intimates that the nation speaks for the community and the community speaks for the nation. The expressions ‘I want to die’ and ‘the creation of the haves’ articulate extreme personal suffering: I cannot take it (having too much to bear). Thus, the community's collective suffering, personally expressed in ‘I want to die,’ articulates public and communal ownership of the nation's suffering. So, ‘I want to die,’ in the tradition of the Psalms and the Quranic laments, articulates a public lament and, indeed, a civic ownership of the nation's suffering. It is, paradoxically, an act of witnessing the community's suffering and bearing it. An Islamic reading of the poem construes it as a mode of shikwa, a lamentation to God in which the speaker's candour is a form of faith.

The collection examines the formal tension between “I” and “We”, between the “I” of individual experience and the “We” of communal solidarity and functions as a marker of the speaker’s position in the gendered hierarchy. She is concurrently one of the subjugated and an individual moral agent who has resolved to articulate her position. The fluidity of her gendered and moral positions is what permits her to exercise a particular authority, as opposed to a general authority. She enunciates her position from a particular locus, and from a particular intersection of the manifold facets of her identity: her religion; her gender; her legal status; and her comprehension of the inequities and suffering her community has sustained and the dignity her community deserves.

Conclusion

The contention the paper has endeavoured to substantiate is that *Faces of Shame* should not be cursorily considered merely a protest poetry collection written by a woman, but rather as a collection where the speaker’s gender, religion, and civic position constitute the moral authority of the poetry. Interpreting this collection through the prism of Stiwanism affords a perspective that is not offered by a politically or class-oriented reading, and discloses the singular consequentiality of Amali's position in the poetry, the function of her Islamic moral framework in furnishing a basis for female indignation that is neither secular nor liberal, and the negotiation of the tension between individual and collective experience through the fluidity of pronouns. Niyi Akingbe (2024) observes that in Nigeria, satire furnishes community

defence, while Bartholomew Akpah (2020) contends that Nigeria's female satirists affirm women's discursive authority through the effective use of satire. *Faces of Shame* (Amali, 2020) accomplishes both. Its satire safeguards community norms and, by its deployment of anger, confers authority on the female voice. It does not apologise, excuse, or attenuate its anger. It does not ask if it is legitimate to speak about the civic sphere. Instead, it resolves the question by speaking about the civic sphere, furnishing both theological and communal sanction for its stance. It also answers the question of whether a female voice that speaks from an Islamic moral standpoint has the entitlement to do so. It has the entitlement to do so, and has spoken. Amali's second collection, *Faces of Shame* (Amali, 2020), alongside her first collection, *I Want to Join Them* (Amali, 2016), may be examined to apprehend the development of the gendered moral voice in her collections. Additionally, the Islamic moral voice that women in northern Nigeria have expressed for centuries may be investigated, from the 19th-century poet Nana Asma'u to the present day. This paper contends that *Faces of Shame* (Amali, 2020) advances a gendered perspective that has not been examined in the extant scholarship. To apprehend this perspective will alter the way this collection is construed.

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