



## SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF MENSTRUAL CYCLE: IMPLICATION FOR WOMEN'S ROLE IN DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*The notion of 'woman' has been designated in both sex and gender terms. The former gives credence to the biological definition of woman as 'human female' while the latter emphasizes social or cultural determination of the 'human female' by virtue of social position, role, norm as well as expectation. From another perspective, the two conceptions are adopted interchangeably, such that being a woman means being 'female'. This discourse draws upon the notion of 'woman' in gender terms, implying that women sexuality (as female) is construed socially via the position/roles ascribed to women in certain physiological states or conditions. The phenomenon of menstrual cycle/menstruation remains one of such condition or state. The sense in which menstrual cycle is perceived as a "dirty" phenomenon, to condition the stereotypical identity of women in such conditions or state as shameful, impure, inactive and unproductive is the point of emphasis in this discourse. Basically, this discourse alludes to the social perception of menstrual cycle within three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, to substantiate the assumption of stereotyped identity attributed to women, with the intention to discern the implication it has for women's role/participation in development. It adopts symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework, and draws insight from relevant texts and literatures. The paper submits that social perception of women in certain physiological condition like menstrual cycle, is also a factor responsible for the stereotyped identity and subordination of women's status, role or participation in development.*

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

### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a country in West Africa that shares borders with Republic of Benin in the West, Chad and Cameroun in the East, Niger in the North and its coastal borders on the Gulf of Guinea in the South and Lake Chad in the North-East axis (Ogege, 2011). The country's population is estimated at 140 million people plus, densely distributed in regions; Northern, North Central, South-South, Eastern, South-western and Middle Belts, which constitute more than 250 ethnic groups. The peoples of Nigeria exhibit diversity in language, cultural and religious beliefs. However, there is convergence by nationality/statehood, lingua franca (English), as well as perceptions about gender-sexual classification of status and roles (driven by patriarchal ideology in the main). With focus on the last point of convergence, this discourse advances the argument that gender-sexual classification of status and role in Nigeria is socially construed, with reference to South-western (Yoruba), Eastern (Igbo) and Northern (Hausa-Fulani) sub-region ethnic groups. It draws on this to emphasize the implications for women's' role in development.

In this connection, the discourse intends to focus on the worldviews (and practices) of menstrual cycle among Nigerian women, especially as exhibited by the predominant (ethnic) groups mentioned previously. While efforts have been made by Abioye and Onyeyegbu (2011); Vaughn (2013) among others, to analyse the phenomenon of menstrual cycle in matters of knowledge, hygiene practices and management in Nigeria; little or no linkages have been established in terms of its implication for women's participation in development. A good start in enhancing such understanding is by examining the issue of menstrual cycle among Nigerian women on the basis of scholars' global efforts to clarify the notion of women, sex and gender and then contextualizing these within the Nigerian context hinted above while embracing the framework of symbolic interactionism.

### **"Being" A Man or Woman: Sexuality and Gender**

In intellectual circles, 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 a feminist standpoint, the understanding that the issue of gender-sex distinction harps mainly on biological and social differentiations between the broad category of men and women, would be taken for granted. It is expedient to link up this idea of gender-sex distinction from scholars' thought, to situate the idea of woman, as it would be adopted in this discourse.

Gender-sex discourse within the disciplinary confines of sociology of gender emerged in 1970s, premised upon the idea of 'sex' as being universal and 'gender' as variation (Agrawal, 2008). There is a hint that the terms could 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. For Oakley (1972), sex refers to the biological difference between male and female, the visible differences in genitalia and related difference in procreative function; while gender is a matter of culture, referring to the social classification into of male and female into 'masculine and feminine' categories respectively. 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 as cited in Moi (1999) 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 being a man is equivalent to being a male and being a women means to be a 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.

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. However, this approach may not be rewarding for an adequate understanding of the matter at hand as it compounds the distinction without a viable explanation of how 'femaleness and maleness' is constitutive of 'womanliness and manliness' consecutively.

Form a different point of view, Stoller (1968) further argues 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. Nicholson's (1994) 'coat-rack' approach 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 (1998), Grosz (1994), Prokhovnik (1999) and 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).

Given the foregoing, an attempt 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 social convention (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 status of women in such condition is expedient.

### **The Phenomenon of Menstrual Cycle**

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, 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* (Jarvis & Morin, n.d).

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. 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. Subsequently, the next section addresses the phenomenon of menstrual cycle as symbolic interaction and the undergirding social perception of women in menstrual condition or state, especially within the context of Nigerian ethnic groups.

### **Menstrual Cycle as Symbolic Interaction**

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. Symbols are often human made and do not refer 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 notes that the culture of a society suggests appropriate types of behaviour for particular social roles. The question remains; how is the phenomenon of menstrual cycle a subject of symbolic interaction? In this direction, one could conceive of menstrual cycle as a symbol that indicates a line of action, in terms of socialization of roles and status of the 'menstruator' (- women in menstrual state or condition). 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, a woman develops the concept of self, subject to the cultural norms and roles that influence her behaviour. Gender expectation of roles is inclusive here. Thus for the menstruator, her actions are being influenced by the attitudes and expectations dictated by the social norms or beliefs. In this regards, the menstruator is accorded as a woman and human person only to the extent she concedes to the expectation of roles and norm within specific social context. Hence, the menstruator probably take up roles in line with symbols whose meanings are shared. This acknowledged the view that humans live in a world of symbols that give meaning and provide basis for human interaction (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald 2004).

### **Perception of Menstrual Cycle among Nigerian Ethnic Groups**

The Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature, which is a major feature of most traditional African societies. In other words, the realm of interpersonal relationship, socio-economic, political ideologies and practices in such society are by-products 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 (Makama, Godiya Allanana, 2013). 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 (FGM); which is perpetuated for the holistic benefit of male/men folk through 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 ways crude, as it objectifies the essence of women in reproductive terms only. It proffers a limit to understanding what make women 'human', in the same sense of what makes men 'human'. The practicality of such theory perhaps thrived in the 1970s when sexual 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. However, the emphasis here is the social perception of menstrual cycle as a medium of situating women's status and roles, with specific focus on the Nigerian context. This would be advanced from a general point of view pervasive in this society, which is the view that the phenomenon of menstrual cycle is a dirty phenomenon, and women in such state are attributed with shame, inactive, unproductive and subdued with the feeling/psyche of inferiority, and thus are the "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 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 piety/purity. 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 that the status of women in a way, is unclean and reduces the relevance of women in religious activities among the Yoruba. The Yoruba also have superstition and myth to corroborate the extent for which the status of women is subdued, in specific reference of women in menstrual state.

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*<sup>1</sup> 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 Yoruba women, are the same biologically with women worldwide. In other words, it is not enough to hinge on myths surrounding the 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, 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 beliefs 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.

Nigeria, being a heterogeneous society, is not only shaped by the predominance of formed (cultural) beliefs; the intrusion of external religious influences cannot be underrated in this matter. As a secular state, Nigeria also share Judeo-Christian and Arab-Islamic beliefs and attitudes towards social realities and phenomenon like menstrual cycle. Such 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.<sup>2</sup> In similar light, Al Qaradwi notes that among the Arabs, menstruators were usually left isolated or indirectly ostracized till after the period of menstruation.<sup>3</sup> The Arab-Islamic stance is pervasive in the social enclave of the Hausa-Fulani in 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 (Oche et al., 2012; Lawan, 2010; Vaughn, 2013). 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 uncleanness). This attitude seems typical of Islamic (Muslim) communities across the world (Ten, 2007), 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. Though Oche *et al* (2007) 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. While granting that this is a consequence of religio-cultural perspective of the enclave, it also seems this is motivated by patriarchal intention, with the ultimate aim of placing women in the ethnic groups at the lowest ebb of social status, identity and recognition.

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 (and women in such state) 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 displacement of women in such conditions from socialization and disqualification from socio-political 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).

However, 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 perception of the woman does not advance human equality and accountability 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) as well as the morale behind exceptions from religious centers or social interaction during the menstrual period. The crux of the foregoing so far is that the positionality of woman in menstrual state, in terms of roles and status, are underscored by social perception that tends to relegate and subdue the woman as the "Other"; hence maligning them from rights and privilege of participation, autonomy and choice.

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.<sup>4</sup> 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 perception is not borne directly out of health or medical motives, and is unjustifiable; even on the basic reason of ensuring good health conditions/state in women.



This kind of social perception is a misconception about the notion of woman as a whole, hence subjects women's status and role to a second place (to those of men), which results to restrain of women's ability 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 it could be conceived that the ascription of dirtiness to menstruators in Nigeria, renders them displaced in social interactions and participation in the domains of politics, family, religion and economy. This simply reinforces the elevation of the patriarchal ego in these domains of life, casting looks on women as the "leaking women".<sup>5</sup> This is to suggest the wrongness of perceiving women (menstruators) as either an abnormal or imperfect human species; a manner of expression in Aristotle's term of the woman as the "mutilated male" (Learner, 1989).

### **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 and Akubue, 2012). By extension, the emphasis here is that the development of a nation like Nigeria should not be hinged on an imbalance social (power) relation that is gender-stereotyped. Perhaps, this is to suggest a reconstruction of the patriarchal structure of the society is expedient to address this imbalance of social participation and interaction.

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 social perception of the issue so far, for the roles of women in development in Nigeria. Though, several works from diverse point of views have accessed the concern of women subordination in development (Okoyeuzu, Obiamaka, Onwumere 2012; Fapohunda, 2012), but not with emphasis on the symbolic instance of women in menstrual state. Basically, given the foregoing discourse, it could be asserted that the social perception underscoring women in menstrual state also predisposed them to subordinate or minimal engagement or participation in development. Simply put:

- It (the social perception) objectifies women as the 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 conditions women's' participation in the quest for development of their self, community, state or nation.

The question that recurs is, 'to what extent and in what way, 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 perception is pervasive? 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. Regarding whether the attempt in this discourse constitute such 'rebellion' is another research interest that requires further critical engagement.



## Conclusion

This paper has made efforts to engage the social perception of women in menstrual state, as dirty, shameful, inactive and unproductive, drawing upon scholars' insights on the worldviews or beliefs held by Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani ethnic groups in Nigeria. Subjecting this to the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, we reiterate in the work that these worldviews condition women in subordinate terms, as the subdued and relegated 'other' in Nigeria, a nation that is also traditionally patriarchal. The work leaps from this background and argues that this social perception is an unjustifiable one, 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 the notion of women (gender and sexuality) is stereotyped for expected (controlled) roles and status. This paper submits 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.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The 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*, Orikire Publications Oakland, Ca, pp. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup>See Leviticus 15: 19-33, *New Jerusalem Bible (1990 Edition)*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, pp.107-108.

<sup>3</sup>See Al-Qaradawi, Sh. Y, n.d. "Islamic Articles: The Status of Women in Islam". Retrieved from <http://www.iupui.edu/~msaiupui/qaradawistatus.html>. Accessed March 28, 2018.

<sup>4</sup>This 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'.

<sup>5</sup>See Curejoy Editorial. 2017. "Is Sex During Menstruation Harmful? The Scientific View". Retrieved from <https://india.curejoy.com/content/sex-during-menstruation-period-is-it-safe/>. Accessed March 27, 2018.

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