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# Women as containers in classical and African/Yoruba cultures

Folake Onayemi

Department of Classics, University of Ibadan

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## Abstract

*The association of women with containers in agricultural terms is a universal phenomenon for the earth was the mother of every man's village and community.<sup>1</sup>*

*The obstacles to the positive enhancement of women in both the Classical and African societies are hydra-headed. The situations of women in these societies have been compounded by factors arising from the over-romanticisation of women's role as mothers in patriarchal set-ups. This role is mythicised and symbolically represented. One of such a symbolical representation is that of a container – the earth, womb, box, and jar. Although this is a universal phenomenon, this paper examines the symbolical representation in the cultures of the ancient Greek, Roman and African/Yoruba cultures. It examines how this representation is effected in each case and shows its effects on women's empowerment in these cultures. It concludes that over-emphasising the mother-role in representing women as containers can be a demeaning factor that makes women struggle against multiple disadvantages in these societies.*

## Part I

In Greek myth, as in Greek art and religious rituals, and even in Greek language, the image of women as a box or container whose content can either help or harm, give or take life, is often portrayed. In Greek mythology, the primordial goddess is Gaia whose functions under the Olympian system are most completely synchronised in the figure of Demeter. In this notion, the woman is the *materia prima* out of which man is created. She is the *Tellus Mater* which brings into the world all beings as well as the very gods<sup>2</sup>. Gaia the great mother is the Mother Earth, the earth's womb where all springs are conceived. She is the great womb that gives and takes the treasures in the universe – life. She is the symbol of fertility and regeneration; things are born from her; they die in order to be born again for a new life. She nourishes her offspring and protects them from all

destructive forces. She contains in herself the negation which is feared in life – death. On one hand a demiurge, on the other the demolisher of her own works; the de-constructor of the constructed, the one that feeds itself with the dead bodies of her children.

The identification of the woman as bearer of children and its comparison with the obvious functions of the earth are evident in the tilling of the soil, ploughing and sowing with penetration and insemination of a woman, the cultivation of soil with the act of child bearing, the harvesting with breast feeding and the like. In this notion, she is a container of heavenly sperm, being the virgin deflowered by the plough and inseminated by the heavenly sperm – rain.

The Greeks called a pregnant woman a closed jar<sup>3</sup> and the word *amnion* (from which is derived the English “amniotic fluid”) is used both for the membrane that surrounds the foetus and for a jar that holds the blood of sacrifice<sup>4</sup>. Earth is the great container of seed. A phrase in the Greek wedding ceremony urged the husband to “plough his wife for the begetting of new children”, for she is the earth, holding concealment, treasure, and mystery, all mixed up with sex<sup>5</sup>.

The sentiment is also common to the ancient Romans. The Latin term *uxor* which is not found in funeral inscriptions at Rome, but in the writings of Terence, Pliny, Cicero, Juvenal and Suetonius implies “sprinkling with seed” and this succinctly describes the role of a woman as wife, container and receiver. *Viri potens* “capable of receiving a man” was a legal term used by Roman lawyers to define judicial maturity of a woman and her capacity for marriage<sup>6</sup>. The male enters into the dark recess of the virgin’s body, a treasure, and spills his milky fluid to mix with the woman’s clay, a new treasure, the hope of the future.

In ancient Greek society, it would have been unthinkable to marry without virginity as it would be tantamount to “buying an empty jar”<sup>7</sup>. In the Greek myth of Pandora, the first woman, the jar is the emblem of the woman herself. It is no coincidence that Pandora is associated with a jar in Greek mythology. Pandora means “all gifted”<sup>8</sup> reflecting the fact that every god and goddess endowed her with a charm and she was imposed on man by Zeus who wished to punish man, to whom Prometheus had given fire. In the woman-hating account of the myth of Pandora, (in both *The Theogony* and *Works and Days*), Hesiod portrays the woman as nothing but a stomach, a consumer of food and wealth to which she contributes nothing, but which like a bottomless pit consumes vast quantities of it.

Pandora opened the jar from which came forth all ills, torment, pains, dreadful diseases which hitherto had been kept from a twin spirit. For she too, very pretty on the outside, is within filled “with lies, with swindles, all sorts of thievish behaviour”<sup>9</sup>:

From her descends the ruinous race and tribe of women, who live as a curse and cause of sorrow to mortal men. No partner in grim poverty, but only useless excesses<sup>10</sup>.

Powell postulates that the name Pandora probably means "All giver" which is another name for the mother-goddess, Gaia – giver of all things, here transformed into a young girl with "thievish morals" and the "soul of a bitch". She is irresistible to the male gaze from without, but within, like Gaia, she is mud, clay.

The notion of the Great Goddess occurs in myth systems all over the world. However, the guises in which she appears in myths throughout the world vary, but certain key images remain constant suggesting that these are remnants and symbols of an archetypal female principle shared by man at all times and in all cultures. The Great Goddess is associated with many symbols, the most prominent being the serpent.

We shall concern ourselves with the other symbols which include various forms of vessels such as the jar, vase, pot oven, chalice, grail, which depict the body of the Great Goddess. As a vessel or container, her body becomes the womb of creation, container of the water of life. Thus, a descent to the underworld becomes a return to the womb of the Great Goddess<sup>11</sup>.

The story of Gaia's creation describes a process of separation and differentiation that gives birth to the tension of two opposing impulses – male and female – and an expanding and contracting universe undergoing repetitive cycles of creation and destruction<sup>12</sup>.

The association of women with containers in agricultural terms is a universal phenomenon for the earth was the mother of every man's village<sup>13</sup>. A nineteenth century North American Indian's aversion to cultivating the land was based on this linkage of women to the earth. The aversion recorded is attributed to one Smohalla of the tribe of Umatilla:

It is a sin to wound or cut or tear or scratch our common mother by working at agriculture. You ask me to dig the earth? Am I to take a knife and plunge it into the breast of my mother? But then, when I die, she will not gather me again into her bosom. You tell me to dig up and take away the stones. Must I mutilate her flesh so as to get at her bones? Then I can never again enter into her body and be born again. You ask me to cut the grass and the corn and sell them, to get rich like the white men. But how dare I crop the hair of my mother? <sup>14</sup>

This representation of female essence and magic control is a carry-over of the awe in which the primitive man held the mysteries of gestation and childbirth, which were thought to be functions reserved for women. However, for the ancient Greeks, as they came to understand their role as sexual inseminators, their pride in the male sex was kindled and this lit a fire of patriarchal revolution to the extent that "they fancied that men were

endowed with generative power, women being merely empty vessels or, at best, sort of incubators designed to carry their children and nurse them in life's early stages"<sup>15</sup>.

And so Greek literature presents a departure from the presentation of women in a high social position of the Homeric Age, wherein the woman typified by characters such as Arete, Penelope, Nausicaa, is held in noble honours as the repository of high morality and old tradition. In post-Homeric Greece, man stood alone at the centre of the universe in a position that totally excluded women from the cultured context. Hesiod introduced the new misogynistic view of the women wherein she is represented as the root of all eternal evil and source of human misery. Pandora, the woman who took off the great lid of the jar with her hands thereby bringing "bales of sorrows for men" in actual fact is a representation of Gaia, the Mother Earth, now dethroned and reduced to the status of a plague.

The effect of the patriarchal revolution in ancient Greece, which dethroned the woman from the symbolic representation of the container of eternal creative force and enthroned the man as the master of the hitherto awesome and complex female nature, is beautifully elucidated thus:

With the development of Greek culture came a steady regression of women's status; from Herodotus to Thucydides, she gradually faded into the home, and Plutarch takes pleasure in quoting Thucydides to the effect that "the name of a decent woman and her innumerable faults – witness the writings of Hesiod, Lucan, Aristophanes, and Semonides of Amorgos. Her legal status deteriorated; inheritance through the mother disappeared; she could not make contracts or incur large debts or bring action at law. Some even went so far as to legislate that anything done under the influence of women could not be legally binding. Furthermore, she did not even inherit her husband property after his death. She retreated to a virtual purdah, locked in her home and advised not to be seen near a window; she spent most of her life in the women's quarters and never appeared when male friends visited her husband."<sup>16</sup>

One of the effects of the regression of the status of women in ancient Greece is apparent in the tragedies. A citable case is that of Orestes against the Furies. Orestes, in avenging his father's (Agamemnon's) death, at the command of Apollo kills his mother Clytemnestra. By so doing, Orestes incurs blood-guilt and so his mother's furies drive him mad and they pursue him to the shrine of Apollo at Delphi. Apollo can purify Orestes of blood-guilt but cannot release him from the Furies and refers him to Athens and Athena for judgement. However in defence of Orestes Apollo gives utterance to the Greek cause of male supremacy in Aeschylus:

The mother is not the parent of the child,  
only the nurse of what she has conceived.  
The parent is the father, who commits

his seed to her, a stranger, to be held  
with God's help in safekeeping.<sup>17</sup>

The situation did not remain forever as shown above. Ancient Greek women remained submissive as long as patriarchal myth kept a hold on their imagination. However, Greek rationalism and scepticism which grew with the questioning of myth by the sophists, liberated the consciousness of the ancient Greek woman, and as the Greek society became more decadent, the feminist rebellion gathered momentum. It is this social and political emancipation of women that Euripides expresses in 431 B.C. through the chorus of Corinthian Women in his *Medea*;

Back to their sources flow the sacred rivers

The world and mortality are turned upside-down.

The hearts of men are treacherous; the sanctions of heaven are undermined.

The voice of time will change, and our glory will ring down the ages.

Woman kind will be honoured. No longer will ill sounding report attached to our sex. The strains of ancient minstrelsy will cease, that hymned our faithlessness. Would that Phoebus, Lord of song, had put into a woman's heart the inspired song of the lyre. Then I would have sung a song in answer to the tribes of males. History has much to tell of the relation of men with women.<sup>18</sup>

In a similar manner, the African/Yoruba like most traditional cultures, links virginity in a woman with a notion of purity. And it is in the symbolical representation of chastity as a half-full, empty or full container that this issue is to be considered here. In the traditional setting a girl who is not a virgin on the bridal night brings shame and disgrace to herself, family and kinsmen<sup>19</sup>. When a bride is found to be a virgin, a symbolic representation of the white sheet smeared with blood is sent in a covered container, usually a calabash bowl, to her parent and can be accompanied by a sum of money and other gifts<sup>20</sup>. In the variant described by Olajubu<sup>21</sup> a gourd full to the brim with frothing palmwine, a piece of traditional white chalk (symbolising purity) and a box full of matches from which no stick has been removed is sent to the bride's father.

However, in the case in which the bride is not found to be a virgin, the treatment is also described by Olajubu in the cited reference. A half gourd of palmwine, a piece of charcoal (symbolising defilement) and an empty match box is sent to the bride's father. In this symbolical representation of virginity, the woman is the gourd and the match box. Whether she contains what is pleasing or disgusting is represented by the fullness or emptiness of

the contents. Fadipe, cited above, adds that these may be perforated cowry shells, in case of a bride that is not found to be a virgin. The punishment for not being a virgin on the bridal night does not constitute only in humiliation and the loss of respect, it includes rough treatment of the bride by the husband or the bride's father in order to elicit a confession from her of the person that deprived her of virginity.

In referring to the loss of a child at birth in Yorubaland, the image of women as containers emerge clearly. In such a situation it is said:

*Omi lódànù; agbè kò fọ.*

It is the water that is spilt; the gourd is not broken.

The symbolical representation here of the woman as the gourd from which the precious water (the baby) poured is meant to bring consolation to the woman and her husband and family. The idea is that the concerned party should be grateful that the woman is alive because since she is an unbroken gourd, she can still be filled with again and she will produce a live baby that will survive.

## **Part II**

We have seen how the presentation of the woman as a container is effected in the ancient Greek and African/Yoruba cultures. It is therefore necessary to examine the effects of equating femaleness with a container as an embodiment of a specific image. Dubish succinctly embodies the effects of such a symbolic representation of women:

Perhaps women are a kind of "natural symbol" because they are always regarded to some extent as objects, not only within the framework of scholarly scrutiny but also within their own societies. And what men symbolise may be less carefully examined simply because it is taken for granted. If it is true that women as object tend to "stand for" things, what, then, does it mean to the women themselves to labour under this "burden of symbolism", since it must affect women's perception of themselves as well as their activities in society?<sup>22</sup>

From the above symbolising of women as a container, places her in a dual role of a social actor and a symbol. Therefore, in ancient Greek, Roman and African/Yoruba worlds, the men are the doers and achievers; women are the nourishers and sustainers-with encouragement and support. An attempt to step beyond this role and assume one of self-reliance and diligence would often earn the women the tags of tyrants and nags, repulsive in adopting a domineering attitude over men.

The association of women with nature, often expressed in allegorical symbolisms as containers, can be either pejorative or highly complimenting.

Clack<sup>23</sup> identifies three influences which have contributed to a negative rendition as the influence of religion, reason, and nature or biology as being destiny. It is in the third aspect that the symbolism of the woman as a container of life is most relevant:

In identifying women with nature, reproduction comes to determine the 'answer' to the 'question' which is women. Famously in the writings of Sigmund Freud, one's biological functions determine one's destiny. Similarly in Rousseau's writings, the identification of women with the role of motherhood determines the form her education should take. Taken together, these elements contribute an oppressive interpretation of the apparent 'connection' between women and nature. Just as the natural world is to be suppressed and overcome by the dictates of reason and order<sup>24</sup>.

This urge to control is identifiable in contemporary society and it is the basis for the production of a structure of binary opposition "in which one term is defined against what is deemed as its other, and decreed that woman shall operate as the negative of man."<sup>25</sup>

It is pertinent to strike a balance among all roles of a woman in any society. This balance is not to advocate an overturn of patriarchy and patriarchal symbols, despite their manipulation in subjugating women. Rather the search for balance in all roles in which the woman is capable of expression, should be a quest for the rejection of trite stereotypes and an embracing of tools of augment and improving opportunities and conditions for woman to excel in all spheres of life.

It is because the Roman woman failed to understand this type of balance that rendered her emancipation unappreciated. As Rome fought her many wars and the Roman State became too wealthy, moral decadence increased and the Roman woman achieved liberation "amid a widespread breakdown of religious faith, and respect for authority"<sup>26</sup>. The way in which the Roman women perceived their reality and the exigency that shaped their consciousness and mobilisation consisted in their negation of the sacredness of being the containers of life:

Roman women unwittingly wrecked with their own hands their feminine strongholds within a patriarchal society; from the proud, dignified and influential mothers they had been in early republican times, they became despisers of their prime biological function in imperial times and began competing with men on men's terms. In this, they were unsuccessful. They made no significant contribution to whatever Roman culture there was; and by failing to re-establish respect for specifically female values, they made their contribution to the corruption of Roman life under the imperial sways of the Caesars . . . Unconscious victims of an unwarranted emphasis put by Graeco-Roman culture on exclusively male values, "modern" Roman women looked down on childbearing as unworthy of their talents<sup>27</sup>.

The situation of the African woman is one case that can be used to exemplify the positive representation of women as containers. Unlike the Roman woman, the African woman on the other hand carries the burden of the family's survival much more than is generally appreciated or acknowledged. Nevertheless, the sacredness of the container of life which the woman embodies is symbolically represented in the African thought as a point of concentration in both the family and the society. The African woman does not see her role as a home maker nor her status as a mother as a liability. Rather they serve to entrench her as the centre of the family, and the centrality of the family is important to both male and female. In Yoruba language there are expressions that portray this centrality of the family as being embodied in the woman. One of these is:

*Ọmọ ìyá kí í yá* – the children of a mother i.e. siblings do not part.

This entrenches the notion that having been conceived in the same container which is their mother's womb, children of the same mother bind together for life. This notion is even more true of the polygeneous homesteads of Africa wherein very important decisions centre on the children of the same mother. It is this notion that is carried over in the Yoruba expression, "*Okùn ọmọ ìyá yí*", literally "the cord of the children of the same mother is tough and binds tight."

African societies exemplified by the Yoruba expresses a symbolical exalting of women's role as mothers. The mother is an artefact of respect, almost to be worshipped for she is the container of the egg (Yoruba *ọlẹ*) of life. This notion is articulated in the following expressions and entrenched in the consciousness of the Yoruba child:

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|---|--|
| (a) <i>Ìyá ní wúrà</i><br><i>Baba ní dígí</i><br><i>Oríṣá bí ìyá kòsí</i><br><i>Ìyá là bá ma bọ</i> | Mother is Gold<br>Father is the mirror<br>There is no deity like the mother<br>The deity to worship should have been the mother. |
| (b) <i>Ìyá là bá kí</i><br><i>Ìyá là bá yin</i>   | It is the mother that deserves exalting<br>It is the mother that we ought to praise  |
| (c) <i>Ìyá ní gbọmọgbọmọ ọmọ</i>  | The mother is the saviour of the child   |
| (d) <i>Ìyá l'alábàro ọmọ</i>  | The mother is the child's confidant.   |

It is good to note however that this exalting of the mother-role does not translate into an over-wielding of political power for the African woman. The danger that is even inherent is an over-romanticisation of the mother-role and an exclusion from the arena of power, as the woman has to struggle "to overcome the important question of a chasm between women's productive and reproductive roles"<sup>28</sup>.

In as much as it is imperative for the African woman to preserve the sacredness of her motherly role and not throw it overboard like the women of ancient Rome, it is also necessary to see the African woman's experience objectively and not emphasise one role at the expense of others.

Over-romanticisation of the role of women as the container that gives life tends to encourage many forms of oppression that simultaneously exist in her world. Ojo, in her article, points out that emphasising the woman's mother-role has been detrimental to the educational achievement of Yoruba women and this is true of African women generally:

Factors that militate against some Yoruba women have their roots in certain cultural and religious beliefs that overstress women's family responsibilities and confine them to their homes. There is still a strong belief among the Yoruba from generation to generation that a woman's first responsibility is to her home. Young females bound by such teaching may not have the incentive to explore all opportunities available to them. Also, house chores and too many business engagements are other distractions from serious educational or career pursuit<sup>29</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

In the symbolic representation of women as containers in both Classical and African cultures there is evidently a difference in assessment of values from one culture to the other. Although in both the Classical and African cultures this representation has led to what is described as "[t]he subject/object dichotomy that excludes women from the realm of the subject"<sup>30</sup> there is evidently a positive identification of the woman as a container in African culture. While in the Classical world, the woman is both the container that gives life and takes it back, and therefore an object to be subjugated, the woman in the African culture is acknowledged as a nexus connecting different strands of members (the father, children, relatives) in the family set-up.

This exalts family life in Africa, an aspect of life that the African person whether male or female must guard jealously as it enhances happy co-existence in family life:

Rather than enhance individualism, African family pattern cultivates the spirit of collective consciousness, mutual reciprocity, and role-sharing. It therefore prevents family dislocation and the plague of self-centeredness that characterize modern civilization<sup>31</sup>.

The woman as a mother is at the intersection in this collective consciousness. However the inherent danger in this role-casting is that the over-emphasising of the mother-role to the detriment of other roles and possibilities is counter-productive to advancement of life in Africa. It results in a veneering of the African woman's genuine needs and awareness, and

feminisation of poverty. And this can become a vicious cycle of oppression and subjugation, leading to dissatisfaction and rebellion and annihilation of progress and advancement, wherein women become the victims of their femaleness.

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