

THE NIGERIAN WOMAN AND FEMINISM: A STUDY OF TWO SELECTED PLAYS TESS ONWUEME

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ABSTRACT

*The subjugation of women by men as being subservient, docile and second fiddle has led to the emergence of feminism as a tool with which women all over the world have been using to fight patriarchy, in order to gain their freedom. Although feminism originated from the Western world, it has spread globally and evolved into different variants. In Africa for example, we have Womanism, STIWANISM, Motherism among others. However, whatever variant, feminism aims to liberate women from the clutches of marginalization and oppression by men, and seek equal and inclusive participation in societal issues to enable them contribute their own quota towards the development of their society. This paper appraises the travails and marginalization of the African woman in the throes of patriarchy and her struggle for emancipation using Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* and *The Broken Calabash*. It also brings to the fore the desire of the Nigerian woman to be treated with deference and equity by the masculine gender. The paper also reveals the position of the Nigerian woman as one who merely wants to be 'shifted for' and accommodated in a society in which she regards herself as an important participant. Some suggestions were, proffered which includes that patriarchy's entrenched laws and norms should be, eradicated from the society; and women should be included in leadership positions in order to have a say in policies and decisions that affect them.*

Keywords: Nigerian Woman, Subjugation, Patriarchy, Feminism, Emancipation, Inclusive Participation.

Introduction

In the last five decades, female writers have been engrossed with the task of employing their writings as oppositional discourse to the stereotypical portraiture of women evident in male writings. The agitations for female rights have since then become a major issue of contention by feminine writers. At the dawn of independence, it has progressed to become a major preoccupation of African female writers to highlight the subjugations and marginalization of women – their agonies, travails and exclusion, which women suffer in the hands of men through patriarchy. The works of these writers are, usually backdated to particular periods of history alluding to the fact that women agitation for self-emancipation is not a recent phenomenon. This is traceable to the phallic nature of African literature, which according to Ogunyemi, (2019), is predominantly dominated by male writers and critics who deal almost exclusively with male characters and male concerns, naturally aimed at a predominantly male audience. African male writers overtime regale the reading public with stereotypes of female

characters such as the witch, the unfaithful wife, the prostitute, helpless victims. The female characters are also, portrayed as being passive, docile observers of actions of men, jealous co-wife, wicked stepmother, underdogs, weak characters without positive or revolutionary attributes. In a nutshell, female characters are often treated with disdain, contempt and indifference in their work. So in an effort to counter this lopsided depiction of women in literature, some female writers who joined their male counterparts later, deliberately or erroneously idealized the female characters in their works, presenting their women as flawless beings while demonizing their male character. In a bid to equalize, they end up exhibiting their prejudices towards men to the extreme by practicing what they condemn (Kolawole, 2017).

Nigerian female playwrights have since realized that the question of equality with men is not achievable and cannot be guaranteed due to the prevailing structure of the society, which is in favour of men whose adherence to deep rooted cultural practices have ensured that inequalities continue to exist in the opportunities available to both sexes for self-actualization. They have therefore, in an attempt to ameliorate this condition exhibited through their works that their fate is not, as a result of, their natural biological inferiority but rather by deliberate and systematic usurpation of the limited opportunities by men. Their agenda therefore, shifted to exposing these male-conceived, male-executed culture bound practices, which brought about these inequalities in the first place and chart ways through which the Nigerian woman can be elevated, empowered, totally emancipated from societal subjugation, and able to live and work inclusively with men towards contributing their own quota to the development of their society.

Aims of the Study

To this end, this paper intends to examine how Tess Onwueme explores the feminist ideology to agitate for women's rights in a Nigerian context.

Statement of the Problem

Feminism signifies a measure of activism that intends to change what happens to women because of the social structures of gender (a social construct). It is a politicized discourse, which uncovers the symptoms of oppression of females, diagnoses the problem and offers alternative versions of livable realities. This paper attempts to examine how Tess Onwueme in her two plays, *The Reign of Wazobia* and *Broken Calabash* achieve the agitation for women's rights in a Nigerian society albeit without the attendant uproar that constitutes such agitations in our climes. It tends to establish through the plays under study that the Nigerian feminist ideology differs from its Western counterparts.

Research Questions

1. How much of feminist concerns did the dramatist show in the selected texts?
2. What are the sociopolitical issues raised in the selected plays?

Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate the Nigerian female writer's portrayal of female characters vis-à-vis the subordinate position accorded women in society.
2. To examine how the dramatist employed the selected plays to respond to sociopolitical realities.

Theoretical Framework

To achieve the set objectives of this research, it is imperative to adopt a theoretical approach that enables a proper study of women. Feminism as a critical mode that emphasizes the female ideology and experimental reality has been, chosen, as the theoretical framework to enable critical analysis of the topic at hand.

The Feminist ideology is concerned with the dual task of deconstructing male cultural paradigms as well as reconstructing a female perspective and experience in an effort to change the tradition that has silenced and marginalized women. Again, Feminism originates and participates in the in the larger efforts of liberating women from the structures that have subjugated them, thereby seeking not only to reinterpret but also to change the world (Greene & Kahn, 1985:1-2). Louise Tyson in her book *Critical Theory Today* defines feminist criticism as the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforce or undermine the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women (1999:82).

Feminist scholarship interrogates gender specific issues that consign all women to the status of the 'other' and 'second class'. De Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949:160) argues that there is no natural reason why women should be, regarded as inferior to men in society. She suggests that the image of the woman in life as well as in literature is manmade, and stresses that politics and literature, history and anthropology, sociology and culture, are part of a network, which contributes to the making of meanings about women. Similarly, Mobolanle Sotunsa in her book *Feminism and Gender Discourse: the African Experience* asserts thus:

Feminist literary criticism confronts patriarchal values. It attempts to unveil the prejudices embedded in the appreciation of arts and cultural artifacts. It also exposes how the linguistic medium promotes and transmits the values of male domination. Feminism's major aim is to combat female oppression and repression in all forms. (2008:8)

As an ideology, feminism is strongly conscious that most of recorded history has given grossly disproportionate attention to the interests, thoughts, and actions of men. Feminist thoughts therefore endeavor both to extend contemporary attention to distinctively female concerns, ideas and accomplishments and to recover the largely unrecorded and unknown history of women in earlier times. In a similar Akachi Ezeigbo, in *Gender Issues in Nigeria: a Feminist Perspective* (1996:01) posits that feminism:

Emerged as a response to the oppressive and unjust laws and attitudes arrayed against women. These laws ensured that women remained in subservient, dependent and marginalized positions, permanently relegating them to the background.

This ideology can, be viewed as one that arises out of the need for women to liberate themselves from all forms of male oppression and domineering attitudes. This is because, the belief that men are superior to women has, been used to justify and maintain the male of positions of economic, political and social power. It is very important to note that the inferior positions long occupied by women in patriarchal society did not originate biologically but rather was one culturally determined, fashioned and implemented by the masculine gender.

Methodology

With feminism being our theoretical compass in this study, the primary texts will be analyzed as feminist plays. These primary texts are *The Reign of Wazobia* and *Broken Calabash* by Tess Onwueme. This study is a library-based research and will involve textual analysis of the primary texts, as well as consultation of critical materials and other texts related to the issues being discussed; these include materials on library theory, African and non-African literature.

Nigeria and the Feminist Ideology

The oppression of women and their subjugation by patriarchy is as old as the world. However, the woman's attempt to give herself a voice to cry against man's desire to continue to dominate and subjugate her can be traced to the 18th Century Europe. The agitation did not however gain foot until the emergence of the feminist ideology in the 18th Century. This agitation was pioneered by, Mary Wollstonecraft in her work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). The movement has since then grown worldwide with an impressive followership in Africa as a whole.

Most Nigerian feminists in their arguments posit that elements of feminism have emerged in Nigeria before the eruption of Western feminism. They however concede that Nigerian women had options and freedom in many spheres of Nigerian life distinct from their western counterparts. The argument that 'patriarchy' and 'female subordination' are Eurocentric concepts is presented by Catherine Acholonu (1995:6), who opines that male and female co-exist through complementarity in Nigerian culture and that patriarchy and matriarchy are concepts imposed on the Nigerian by the colonialists. She further argues that:

Patriarchy, the system that places men on top of the social ladder seems to be an inappropriate term to describing the organization of the social systems of the Nigerian peoples. This is because several Nigerian societies reflect systems with ranging degrees of dual sex hierarchies in which men and women exist in parallel and complementary positions and roles within society.

In a similar vein, Sotunsa (2020:43) asserts the primacy of the concept of womanism as a less radical feminist ideology that suits the Nigerian female's overall outlook and general attitude towards the society. She advances this argument further quoting Ogunyemi (2019:34) that: Womanism, is black centered, it is *accommodationist*. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism. But unlike, radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between the black women and the black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand. It is also interested in communal wellbeing thus extending its ideology towards a Marxist praxis. (2019:34).

The concept of womanism, has been embraced by Nigerian feminists just as they have rejected the brand of European/American feminism that pours venom on the marriage institution and rather engage in lesbianism, upholds lesbianism and 'violently tears off the umbilical cord that ties the male to the female. Womanism preaches complementarity of the two sexes in the creative order (Maduka, 2021:18). Thus 'womanism' is a hybrid term that tends to reconcile feminist issues with matters peculiar to women of Africa and the black diaspora. Amadi (2022:156), avers that the committed black womanist writer tries to empower her male by interpreting the male and female worlds, joining her strength to his, until inequalities along racial (sexist) lines are eradicated. Likewise, Cooper (2017:182) redefines a woman's cause as

not that of 'the white woman, not the black woman, nor the red woman, but the cause of every man or woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong. For her, it is 'a woman's movement in that it is led and directed by women for the good of women and men for the benefit of all humanity'.

Leadership and the Nigerian Woman in *the Reign of Wazobia*

The Nigerian feminist dramatists tend to seek an end to female oppression in the guise of tradition, culture or religion in a patriarchal society. They capture vividly in their works, the agonies of the female in such a gender-biased society. Their concern therefore is to use the stage to change man's inauthentic image of women and to treat female concerns as also a legitimate aspect of African literature. The Nigerian woman living in a patriarchal society roundly understands the positive weapon of speech, sight and action and explores this medium to further her feminist agenda. This agenda Tess Onwueme continuously establish in her works.

Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* focuses on the female questions with Wazobia, the heroin of the play revolting violently against the restrictions imposed on women in an ever changing and dynamic society. Wazobia is made the regent of Ilaa, in the Anioma Kingdom for only three seasons. Apparently haven been dissatisfied with the roles her society imposed on the women, King Wazobia tries to use her position to inspire the women in the eradication of man-made laws that eternally condemn women to male servitude. She charges the women to:

Wazobia: arise women...

They say your feet are feeble show them those feet carry the burden of the womb. They say yours are frail, show them those hands have claws, show them those hands are heavy. Wake up, women. Arise, women. Barricade the entrance to the city. I can hear trumpet sounds voice of men spitting blood to drown us. With your claws hook them, but spill no blood for these are sons of our womb (Wazobia, 1992, 2).

The men of Ilaa want Wazobia to step down, so that a king can be, elected. The issues as we observe is not just about the regency of Wazobia but that the men of Ilaa feel quite uncomfortable and dissatisfied with Wazobia's style of leadership which has been geared towards the emancipation of Ilaa women. Like any ruler, Wazobia tastes power and feels quite intoxicated, with her 'feet dancing in the air' and so worried and disturbed that men want her out so soon:

Wazobia: they want Wazobia ousted Wazobia too resists and will persist. I Wazobia will show them what the left hand did to the anus. I am the earth itself where will you, move to? I Wazobia have tasted power and ILL NOT GO (Wazobia, 1992, 6).

Wazobia's refusal to quit the throne exacerbates the men's fears and tears the society apart. One must however understand the agitation of Wazobia and her feminine counterparts which arises as a result of the conduct of the men of Ilaa, who have no regard whatsoever for their women. These men sit a home and expect their women to do all the farm work and at the end of the day warm their beds. Their widows are the worst, as they become victims of every barbaric law and strange practices, which not only continuously remind of them of their sorrows but also debase them as human beings. Wazobia is of the opinion that widows must, not be subjected to incessant funeral rites that men under similar situations will not perform.

Her attempt to eradicate these practices is, not only opposed by her society but the rest of her gender whom she tries to free from this oppressive customs. Her strongest opposition is from Omu the mother of women.

Omu: 'It is our tradition that women who survive funeral rituals dance in the market place as final mark of their innocence regarding their husband's death. A woman who dies mourning is unclean and must be, left to rot in the evil forest.'
(Wazobia, 1992, 21)

From the above statement, we can easily deduce that sometimes in order to properly achieve their agenda, men usually employ the service of women to assist in their acts of oppressing and frustrating the feminine gender. Unfortunately, for people like Omu, they most often ignorantly jump at these opportunities and unknowingly wreck more havoc on their lineage. Wazobia will not allow her women to dance naked in public to entertain lustful eyes. We are rather, taken aback at such in dignifying practice, which totally debase the woman. But for Omu, tradition is sacrosanct and must be respected and upheld. She argues that she will not be party to the death of tradition. For Wazobia, the task before the women is important and expedient, as she wants a total abrogation of all laws and customs, which enslave women as in "women, that is, the task before you. To set the hand of the clock aright. To move time, and not allow time to move you...it's our time to till. It's our time to tend that we may be planted on firm soil..(Wazobia, 1992, 23).

Onwueme in this play queries why the African woman is always at the receiving end, that despite all her efforts to ensure peace at the home front, the man is never satisfied. She provides comfort and become the man's cover cloth. She, assisted by her children, till the soil, harvest the produce, sells it in the market, brings the money home to cook for the man and despite her tiredness warms his bed. Onwueme engages our sensibilities through patriarchal societies believe that the woman should always provide succor for the man in all situations and at all times. This position that a woman must serve her husband and always be at his beck and call is claimed to have been supported by tradition and that it behooves the woman to provide all the comfort the husband requires. Imagine the man who chased the wife into the king's chamber expects her to prepare his food, lay the table and await his presence by the food till whenever he comes back home. This, he thinks is tradition which he insists must be upheld.

Man: Tradition? And is that why a woman, a mere woman that I paid to get with my own hard earned money should challenge me in my house. Does she think I carry these balls between my thighs for nothing?...the gods of our land ordained that a man must own a wife to bear him children...(Wazobia,1992, 24).

In Wazobia's own estimation, the society must be able to 'sift from time what the time demands and promises'. Tradition must change with time and be carefully sifted so that the society does not turn barbaric.

Wazobia: ...and did your gods, also ordain that you must turn these women to slaves? That their tongues must be slashed for daring to see with their eyes? And hear with their ears that dare to reveal to them what tune time beats? You complain that their hands are weak when you forbid to, use the hands. You condemn their feel as 'frailty' but shudder when they want to stand firm on the soil. (Wazobia, 1992, 25).

Wazobia attempts to provide good and egalitarian leadership. She embraces all, irrespective of gender and age. But apparently the men in the society dislike this kind of leadership and think it high time that Wazobia was dethroned. She is of the opinion that the relationship between man and woman is symbolic and therefore all humanity should relate on equal basis. For the survival and progress of the village of Ilaa, she however makes the following pronouncements:

Now hear our manifesto. Henceforth the symbol of our Kingdom shall be the palm-tree which from top to bottom has all and produces; from leaves, to thatch, to shade, to broom. From fruit, to wine, to oil, to kernel that is the palm. Each part, its own value and yet inter-dependent on all other parts. We all, man, woman, child must be schooled. To actualize these potentials for full benefit for all with none posing an obstacle to another, with the left hand washing the right, and the right hand, the left. Henceforth, women will have equal representation in ruler-ship...henceforth women shall have equal rights of inheritance on matters of land and property. Today, we put a final seal on wife beating. For none is slave to another. Man and woman decree as partners in progress, not antagonists (Wazobia, 10992, 34).

For long, the society had waited for these changes to come but they have taken over the stage through Wazobia's pronouncements. It is quite, obvious from the foregoing that the goal of Onwueme in this play is not to radically dissociate herself from the male counterparts but to not only create a space for the woman but equality and respect.

Bonding is a veritable tool, which Wazobia employs in this play to achieve her objectives. By bonding here, we mean the means by which women harness their collective strength to ensure that power acquisition and distribution is not, executed to their detriment. Onwueme uses bonding to create a sense of camaraderie amongst women in the hope that it would motivate the more perceptive women into positive actions that will benefit every woman and the larger society. Realizing the importance of Omu, the queen and mother of the tribe in her task to economically empower Ilaa women and politically emancipate them, Wazobia reaches out to Omu to whom she extends her hands of fellowship and comradeship. We will realize that Wazobia succeeds in her task of emancipating her women simply because she is, supported by influential women like her mother, the Queen mother Omu, the Queen mother of the tribe who were able to mobilize other women to the rescue.

The wind of change blowing through Ilaa can also be, attributed to the opportunity of Western education, which Wazobia was able to acquire. Therefore, her education affords her the opportunity to see these barbaric laws and ensure their eradication. The stage is then set for a battle between tradition and modernity; between traditional customary norms and Western laws and customs.

Tradition and the Nigerian Woman in *The Broken Calabash*

Onwueme furthers her feminist objective in *The Broken Calabash* where Ona a female undergraduate is the only child of her parents. Unfortunately, for Ona, tradition forbids her as an only child to marry outside but should instead stay within her immediate family and bear children in order to propagate the lineage. As an alternative, she could marry another lady into the family as a way of buying her freedom. Ona finds both alternatives repulsive and decides to choose neither. Courtuma, Ona's father fawning over her as an only child

becomes overbearing and gets in her way as she attempts a love affair with Diaku. This love affair, she clandestinely embarks upon without the knowledge of her father. This is, revealed further in the following monologue:

It's more distressing for one to feel and express oneself. My father inhibits me in every way. He always hangs around whenever Diaku comes to see me. Since my father only permits me to attend Service on Sundays, Diaku and I have devised a means of beating time. I normally look forward to Sundays when Diaku and I can both elope from the Church after the gospel to his house. And as soon as we guess the service is over, I wipe my lips and fly home as if no sugar can dissolve in my mouth (Calabash, 1984, 12).

The love affair soon degenerates into a hide and seek affair in the lovers attempt to play out Courtuma. Diaku's parents visit and ask for Ona's hand in marriage, but the father declines insisting that his daughter is an Idegbe who must stay at home and procreate heirs for the family. Diaku therefore loses interest and abandons Ona for Ugo, her best friend. This action enrages Ona, who sees her father as responsible and determines to revenge. Ona soon becomes pregnant (for God knows who) and accuses her father of the pregnancy. Courtuma unable to acquit himself of the charge commits suicide.

In furtherance of the theme of tradition against modernity, which Onwueme treats in *The Broken Calabash*, we will observe that the erosion of values in *The Broken Calabash* arises from an indigestion of both the traditional values the imported Western culture which at times become so aggravated that the individual who has to synchronize the divergent values is psychologically affected. Ona's inability to distill these differences destroys her and her family. Despite the unsavory choice of marrying another female into the family to take up her role, she embraces her modern concept of freedom of will, independence and individualism. Onwueme through this play raises some pertinent questions and queries man's continuous relegation of the woman even in a modern society. For her, how much longer must the family values of continuity be entirely dependent on male progeny? What does a family do when all the children are females? What is the place of women in a changing modern society?

Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing that most Nigerian societies are still, characterized by very strong value systems, with customs and practices that tend to undermine the role of women and emphasize their subordinate position in society. We have been able to establish in this paper that Gender discrimination prevails in the social institutions of marriage, the family, inheritance, property rights, kinship relations, and indeed everyday human relationships.

Onwueme, through these plays stimulates our consciousness and urges us all to reassess our attitudes towards the feminine gender. It is quite, obvious that what Onwueme seeks, is to ensure that patriarchy that entrenched laws and norms are, eradicated. Her goal is to ensure that equity and equality prevails in her society. For her, the Nigerian woman merely wants to be 'shifted for' and accommodated in a society in which she is an important participant. In her estimation, women as a result of the substantial contribution which they make to the economy, the home and the society at large, deserve more respect and attention and ascribed more roles alongside their male counterparts. She does not see leadership as the exclusive preserve of the male gender but rather a common heritage of all, in which equality and mutual

self-respect must hold sway. She however advocates bonding as a veritable antidote for female empowerment. This means that if all women share their problems with one another and come to one another's support, they will be physically and mentally free from male torture and enslavement.

Onwueme employs female bonding in the *The Reign of Wazobia* to create a sense of camaraderie amongst the women of Anioma Kingdom in the hope that it will motivate the more perceptible women like Omu into positive actions that can stimulate discourse, which will in turn benefit not only the women, but the entire society. We will observe that the collective struggle of these women not only reduce the pain, distress and hurt which patriarchy inflicted on them but also gave them a sense of belonging and fashion them into a strong formidable force. Engaging the character of Ona as a symbol of change in *The Broken Calabash*, Onwueme seeks the elimination of all harmful cultural practices and recognition of equality and equity in the relationship of the two sexes. She asserts through the play that a woman should no longer be compelled to satisfy cultural requirements that have no benefit for her, just because the society approves of them and demands them off her.

The medium of literature has over the ages, been perceived to have the capacity to influence social and individual understanding and change. It is therefore, assumed that the Nigerian female playwrights exploring the medium can use it as a veritable vehicle for the advancement of the social status of the Nigerian woman, thereby creating a world that is a social ideal.

Recommendations

Based on our conclusion, the following recommendations were proffered:

1. Patriarchy's entrenched laws and norms must be dismantled and eradicated, for equity and justice to reign in our society.
2. All women must embrace female-bonding and work together as partners to eradicate the enslavement and marginalization of women, rather than abating and collaborating with men to subjugate other women.
3. Every member of the society must ensure that equity and justice among all genders prevails.
4. Women should be included in leadership positions in order to be present/ have a voice in policies and decisions that affect them.

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