

Feminism & Nigerian Theatre

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1.0 Introduction

Nigerian theatre is known for its sociological outlook and approach to issues. It is a theatre that is alive to the social realities of its time – a theatre where socio-political and cultural issues are evaluated and possibly judged in order to bring about a better society. The playwrights are therefore the vanguards of the society, keeping watchful eyes and attentive ears to the happenings in the society. One wonders, however, if such watchful eyes and attentive ears have been extended to the yearnings and aspirations of the female gender in our society. Many Nigerian playwrights (especially men) have created powerful female characters that have played the significant roles of social reformers; yet little or no attention is given to the plight of these women in the society they labour to reform. It is this state of affairs – a calculated theatrical conspiracy of silence against the plight of women in contemporary Nigeria – that informs the writing of this paper.

2.0 Realism, Nigerian Theatre and Feminist Consciousness

Realism is the dominant literary movement in modern theatre. It arose as a reaction against the elaborate theatricality and artificiality of the 18th and early 19th centuries that threatened to turn theatre into a place of mere entertainment. Theatre was then a place of fashionable diversion from the serious and immediate social issues, producing a form of life that has little or nothing in common with that outside the stage. The aim of realism in art is naturalness and truth to life. With realism, theatre goes in search of a drama (plays) of contemporary relevance. With the fourth wall convention of realism, theatre urges the audience to regard the stage as a microcosm of society, and to perceive the dramatic actions as a copy of life as it is being lived in the society.

Nigerian theatre is a realistic theatre. Virtually every Nigerian playwright is socially committed though it depends on what one is committed to and how. It could be seen as a form of inhumanity, a crime against the Nigerian people, if a Nigerian playwright writing for Nigerian audience today chooses to merely play to the gallery in the face of the numerous injustices in the society. According to Raymond Williams, the writer begins by being aligned, “born into a social situation with all its specific perspectives ...” (1989:86). From its inception, Nigerian theatre is deeply committed to issues of immediate social relevance – from the issues of cultural contamination and degradation to those of moral and social decadence including the inhuman oppression of one class by another. It has lived up to Brecht’s view that “theatre must keep up with the times and all the advances of the times and not lag several thousand miles behind” (1964:57). It is a theatre dedicated to social reformation and transformation through a critical appraisal and reappraisal of social practices, values, aspirations, issues and problems.

Feminist consciousness is the awareness of the social and cultural oppression of women and their consequent struggle for liberation. Feminism is the political label for this consciousness. The history of feminism is the history of women resistance and opposition to patriarchy. It is an ideology in art and life that resists "patriarchy" and challenges "the female essence". Kate Millet (1971) in her book *Sexual Politics* defines patriarchy as " ... male dominance over female" and insists that, "it consists the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power." (pp. 25; 118). Patriarchal oppression consists therefore in the obnoxious concept of "female essence" by which certain social standards of femininity are imposed on all biological women to make it see as if the oppressive conditions are natural. "Women", Eva Figes rightly said, "have been largely Man-made" (1986:15). Worse still, language, that which validates existing reality by assigning a name to it, seems to legitimate the existing order by the presence of the binary oppositions like male/female; man/woman, and so on. Feminists locate the root of women oppression in culture, traditional practices and social conventions.

Women oppression, the dehumanizing treatment of women because they are women and which if they were not women in the same circumstance they would be free from, is one of the major realities in modern Nigerian society. No one can deny the practice in Nigeria where a widow is made to drink the water used in washing the corpse of her husband just for her to prove her innocence (concerning the man's death) to the world. What about the horrible discriminating practice where male circumcision is for beauty aimed at making the male sex organ more active for coitus while that of woman is aimed at quenching her libido and to deprive her of sexual enjoyment, thereby reducing her to something to be enjoyed. It is also a fact that our society is "patrilineal", and that forces the society to hold the male child in higher esteem than the female counterpart and this is often displayed in extravagant words and deeds. These and other instances testify to the fact that Nigerian society cannot exonerate itself from the oppression, marginalisation and suppression of women. Nigerian women have joined other women in Africa in particular and in the world in general to quest for the liberation of its gender from social and cultural oppression. The struggle for the liberation of African women is summarized in the concept of a liberal Feminism known as Womanism.

Womanism is feminism in African context. It is a political ideology that sums up the African women's quest for emancipation within the framework of non-oppressive African culture. As African feminist concern, it not only fight against all forms of crimes against womanhood but also seeks for ways to empower women to break through the socio-cultural walls erected to suppress and marginalize women. Womanism calls for a re-examination and a deconstruction of some African cultural histories, traditional practices and social values and norms in the light of the realities of modern time. The aim is to create a true, democratic society built on gender equity and justice. But the question being asked in this paper is how the Nigerian theatre, in its avowed commitment to social realism and reconstruction has responded to feminist consciousness? The question is articulated through a critical examination of the different approaches of some Nigerian playwrights to feminist issues. The paper offers a feminist analysis of some selected African plays relevant to the study. The Nigerian

theatre is aware of the feminist struggle. It has responded to it in various ways. It is its response that is the concern of this paper.

3.0 Feminist Aesthetics on Nigerian Theatre

Prominent among the various approaches adopted by Nigerian playwrights in their representation of Feminism is Ola Rotimi's farcical cum comical approach in his play *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* (1977). In the early part of the play before the emergence of Lisa, Ola Rotimi presents a group of dumb, docile women who are rendered inactive not by an express command of the gods as in *The Gods are not to Blame*, but by a long period of subjugation under patriarchal culture that has made their oppressed state to look like a natural way of life. This group of women can be illustrated with Ola Rotimi's play *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977) before the intervention of Liza in the play. The man of the family, Rahman Lejoka – Brown, is the god of his own household. His orders are as potent and as final as those of the gods. The ex-military-man-turned-politician prides himself as being more prudent than his father because he (Lekoja-Brown) acquires as many women as he can "handle" unlike his father who had a hundred and fifteen of them. In fact, he "handles" them as perfect as he does his other possessions. His is a traditional African family that is anchored on the culture of his people and the exigencies of the time. His marriage to the two wives at home is a testimony to his prudence. He acquires Mama Rashida, "a well-mannered, quiet, well-bred African pigeon" (p.9), from his late elder brother. "Mama Rashida was the oldest of my late brother's wives", he explains to his friend, Okonkwo, "My elder brother ... died in a train accident... my father ... had married her off to me!" (p.9). In addition to the "well bred pigeon", he marries m Sikira to meet the demands of his political ambition. Being in need of women's vote and realising that Sikira is the daughter of the president of the Nigerian Union of Market Women, Lejoka-Brown acquires her for electoral victory. He has planned to settle her with money and send her away after the election.

Though they live together under the same roof as husband and wives, the man is far removed from his wives emotionally and otherwise, and this is evident in his relationship with them. His communication with the wives are mostly in the form of commands and orders to which they unreservedly respond "Yes, my Lord". The women have neither voice nor choice; neither ambition nor power and are completely dependent on their husband. Lejoka-Brown is their mouthpiece. The house is "peaceful" because patriarchy – that obnoxious belief that man must be-on-top of woman (whatever that phrase mean) – is maintained. The women are complacent about their subservient position. For them, it is a natural state. They do not agitate for another state because they are unaware of an alternative way of life for wives within a traditional family. It has to take someone from outside with a different way of life to rouse the women from their slumber, and Liza is the one.

Liza, a Kenyan lady, a medical doctor and the only one who Lejoka-Brown has married for love is a different woman. Before she enters Lejoka-Brown's family, Lejoka-Brown is thoroughly agitated, feeling completely insecure. He confesses this to his friend Okonkwo when he said that,

Here I am, running up and down, renting a flat getting restless, going crazy! Just because; .. I mean, I whose grandfather had a hundred and fifteen wives, ... one hundred plus ten plus five breathing wives all at once under his very roof! But here I am, with only two little crickets, expecting one more – just one more canary, and I can't just pick her up by the arm and say to her: 'woman I forgot to tell you; ... Here-meet your other ehm ... sisters-in-marriage! (p.28).

The fact emanating from this passage is that Lejoka-Brown is restless because he knows that Liza, the American-trained medical doctor, is a different woman from the "two little crickets" of wives in his family. At least she is "a canary". Lejoka-Brown questions "Liza take eye see Mama Rashida?" (p. 30) to his servant Polycarp who runs to the airport to tell Lejoka that Lisa his wife who he is waiting for is already at his home confirms it. Why is Lejoka-Brown, the god of Lejoka-Brown family, agitated about Liza's return? It is undeniable because Liza unlike the other wives is empowered by formal education. She is trained as a medical professional with a Kenyan scholarship. Liza is therefore intelligent, powerful, independent and assertive. She knows what to say and how to achieve her aim. She is a totally different woman from Mama Rashida and Sikira. She is a symbol of an empowered, modern African (Nigeria) woman.

Even before getting the telegram informing him about Liza's return, Lejoka-Brown has started making albeit bad and unnecessary adjustments to impress and accommodate her. He knows therefore that the high-handed, suppressive method he is using with the other two wives cannot be applied to the new woman. He starts to adjust both himself and his traditional family to accommodate her. "A man must measure up" (p. 29), he told his friend in the fit of his adjustment. One of the important moves he makes in order to "measure up" is to dabble into politics in order to acquire some titles and positions that will enhance his social status so that his headship in his family is not tampered with. Lejoka-Brown's attitude is a good example of patriarchal attitude – that which makes men believe that they must be on top of women in all things, especially in their relationship with their wife. This is believed to be a sure way of retaining one's supremacy and authority at home. And feminism is against patriarchal attitude because of the unnecessary tension and strains it puts on the family as is seen in Lejoka-Brown's family. It is the patriarchal attitude that for a man to be a man and for him to be on-top, he must "measure-up" with or out measure his wife that makes Lejoka-Brown to meddle in politics, marry Sikira and do many other things so as to measure up or "out measure" Liza with her degree in medicine. When his aspirant political position fails to draw from Liza the kind of attention he has hoped for, he becomes impatient. "After all, let's face it," he said, "I got into all this mess in order to make her feel proud" (p.28).

Liza's presence in Lejoka-Brown's house exposes the enslavement of the other women. She has refused to be "doomed to becoming one of the three sacrificial slaves" in the "nauseating, clay-walled, gas-chamber" of a house, all in the name of a wife. Instead of keeping a distance with the 'slaves' as Lejoka-Brown has planned, Liza mingles with them and tries to empower them in the best ways she could in the spirit of sisterhood. For instance, she helps Sikira (who she has thought to be a house girl and not a wife) to develop poise; teaches Polycarp, Lejoka-Brown's servant, the skill of cage

making and also shows Mama Rashida how to boost her petty trading to yield her higher profit. The fact that the women hold tenaciously to what they have learnt and have also started making use of them at once confirms the fact that they were in the subjugated position because they lack the knowledge of and the power to agitate for an alternative. In the end the traditional family breaks up because the husband fails to make necessary adjustments to accommodate the new women. Instead he uses violence and intimidation to force a new woman into an obnoxious old traditional family. His determination to resist change is seen when he addresses Liza:

Wife, it is too much indulgence that makes the she-goat grow a long beard like her husband, the she goat ... Now, I'm no longer going to lie down forever... while you wipe your feet on all the moral standards I have set in this house!

He believes it is his sole right to set the standards and principles that dictate moral and social conducts: It is for the women's own to follow without question.

The comic-farcical method of Ola Rotimi's *Our Husbands* frustrates the feminist reading of the play. It is clear that the playwright's aim is to make fun of all feminist ideals. In his subtle way, he like some other Nigerian playwrights upholds patriarchy in the name of preserving cultural tradition. In using the comic-farcical approach to feminism, he trivialises its ideals. He achieves the ridiculing of feminist ideals by misrepresentation. He makes the ideals too confusingly ambiguous as to be objectionable. The technique of using an American trained woman Liza to teach the ideals of freedom to African women in African society is wholly unacceptable to African feminists or "womanists". Liza can only but teach the western women's conception of emancipation which is ultimately the dissolution of the traditional family in order to establish a new one based on equality. For many African feminists, the traditional family is so central to our African communal way of life to be risked for anything. Rather it favours a reformation of the traditional family to accommodate the changes of the modern era in establishing a just society based on gender equity.

Also the method of tactically de-emphasizing the good aspects of Liza's ideology and deliberately emphasising its wrong application by the women is aimed at Portraying the feminist ideals as irrelevant and bad. For example, the playwright represents Sikira as a thoughtless woman whose brain is too weak to accommodate certain truths. Immediately she regains her poise through Liza's lesson, her head becomes too swollen that she feels the family can no longer accommodate her. Instead of seeking for a reformation of the old traditional family as Mama Rashida has done, she walks out to pursue her political ambition. Representations like that explained above seem to support the objectionable view that women's involvement in public life is injurious to the family. Yet the society is producing many Lizas.

Nigerian theatre has represented many female characters that tried to extricate themselves from the oppressive effects of cultural tradition on their own personal aspiration. Ona, an undergraduate student and the protagonist of Tess Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*, Ogwoma, the protagonist of Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, Ebiere, the protagonist of J.P. Clark's *Song of a Goat*, and others are examples of women who

challenge the supremacy of certain cultural norms and practices over and above the personal aspirations and freedom of the individual. Unfortunately, all the female characters mentioned above fail in their one-man (or one-woman) conquest. In this way of crushing the women, the quintessence of culture and its intolerance of the women aspiration is maintained. There was little or no consideration of their predicaments. The theatres fail to give their views a fair representation.

Representations of feminist ideals on the stage are fraught with ambiguities. In Sofola's *The Wedlock of the Gods*, for example, cultural beliefs and traditional practices that oppress women are exposed to the audience only for them to witness their complete submersion in the supremacy of cultural tradition. The facts of Ogwoma, the female protagonist in the play, being given out in marriage against her choice, the widowhood rites that consigned her with a shaven hair to the ashes by the fire side for three months in the name of mourning and the intimidating practice of imposing her late husband's brother on her as her husband are represented as secondary issues. The inhumanity of the above cultural practices is made less poignant by the playwright's excessive focus on the so-called cultural violation: Ogwoma sleeping with her lover during the period of mourning. In fact the dramatic action centers on the senselessness of Ogwoma's action and how she pays the price, which is "a swelling of the body with water leaking from everywhere" (Sofola 1972: 19). Sofola deliberately sidetracks the gruesome reality of women oppression in the play as if they are not worthy subjects for drama. May be the playwrights are trying to be patriotic to the culture they labour to prove its dignity to the world. One would have thought that thirty-two years after Sofola's play feminist issues would have occupied a centre stage in Nigerian theatre.

Wazobia a play by Tess Onwueme is one of the few plays where women's resistance to cultural oppression is allowed to succeed on the stage. In many other plays, their struggle is crushed and their quest misrepresented as a violation of culture, and are hence not allowed to see the light of the day. Ona's determination to free herself from the oppressive custom of "Idegbe" and the "cast system" is subsumed under the strength of African culture. The voices of Ebiere in J.P. Clark's *Song of a Goat*, Liza's in *Our Husbands*, Titi's in Clark's *The Masquerade*, Yetunde's in *Song of a Median*, Ogwoma's in Sofola's *The Wedlock of the Gods* and several others are represented as voices of evil and of cultural aberration. They are represented only to be crushed as a warning to others.

The women's victory cry of "We have taken over the stage! Women have taken over the stage" in Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (Onwueme 1992:35), re-echoed by Lejoka-Brown in *Our Husbands* (1977:70) is equally not within the framework of "womanism". So also is Mrs. Ife's rejection of feminism in Osoyin's *Woman* when she objects that Ogbeni, a man, should help her out in the kitchen: "Kitchen is a woman's world", she said, "forget about women emancipation, which I do not share. As battle ground is for men, so is kitchen for women" (p.112). The issue at stake is not who goes to the kitchen, but that the one who goes to the kitchen is no less a human being than the one who goes to the battlefield. After all, who says the kitchen is less important than the battlefield. Whoever says so should go to the battlefield with an empty stomach. To feel that because one does not go to the kitchen means that it is less

dignified is a patriarchal attitude, and it is this attitude, which informs other oppressive actions against women that both feminism and womanism strive to abolish. The examples given above are grave misconceptions of feminism as African women conceive of it. The future of African family, I believe, lies not in wishing away the feminist ideals but in using its good aspects to reform the traditional family. Theatre is one of the viable tools for creating the awareness for such reform. To make a mockery of Nigerian women's groan for freedom from cultural oppression as if it is irrelevant is to deceive the Nigerian public. If theatre will continue in its role of education and reformation, it must give the issue of feminism the attention it deserves.

The confused comical approach to feminist issues as seen in *Our Husbands* represents the view of many Nigerian men who feel that the issue of women emancipation is not worthy of serious attention on the stage. Playwrights like Wole Soyinka neglects the feminist ideals to extinction by representing women as willing slaves of the culture that feminism kick against. Bode Osayin sympathises with what some women go through as mothers. In his play *Woman*, Osayin gives a graphic picture of the bitter experiences of motherhood where Mrs. Ife has to cope with her sick son alone. But while Osayin sympathises with women, he does not believe in the political or organised struggle for their emancipation. He feels that a writer should not concern himself with feminism. In an interview with Duro Oni, Osayin idealizes the issue of feminism when he said, "... in a just society, there should be no need for feminism" (Oni 2003: 84). But the fact remains that ours is an unjust society. After all, in a just world, there will be no need for pan-Africanism, Negritude, Marxism and the likes.

Conclusion.

Why is the woman's case different? Why should the injustice against women not awaken the creative genius of many men and women in Nigeria? The triviality and artificiality of Noel Coward and other romantic playwrights in the 18th and early 19th Century England roused the genius of George Bernard Shaw, the father of modern British drama. Despite the ruins in Britain after the World Wars, the playwrights were thrilling the complacency of the over-fed Dandies with the little acts of the Working-class pupils splitting their infinitives. In response to the lies being propagated on the stage, Shaw wrote *Plays Unpleasant* where he confronts the English people with the reality of the ugly side of their society. Prominent among the plays is *Mrs. Warren's Profession* that indicts the society against women prostitution. Similarly in the 18th Century Europe, the people's attitude of hanging on outworn and out molded morals and social conventions awakened the angry pen of Henrik Ibsen, the father of realism. In two of his plays *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* he calls for a reformation in the relationship between man and wife by portraying on the stage a truthful account of the lives of men and women of his time. He deals as a matter of urgency with the issue of a false conception of women, which suppresses and oppresses them.

If the crusade of Nigerian theatre against injustice must be seen as unbiased and truly realistic, it must go by the words of Marshal in *Moroundadun* "Let all prisons fall!" (p. 77), and this must include those that enslave our women. The battle against injustice on the stage must be total. I believe that some Nigerian men are progressives. It is

good if they display their concept of a new, empowered African woman (wife and daughter) on the Nigerian stage. Theatre is a place of analysis and judgment. Nigerian women will always be eager to watch the theatrical response of Nigerian men to the cultural crimes against womanhood.

Note

1. "Idegbe" refers to a woman who is the only child of her parents, and is therefore demanded by custom not to marry out but to stay and raise children in her father's house. Alternatively, she can marry another woman into her father's compound to do the work of procreation in her place. This is to ensure that the father's lineage continues in existence.

The caste system refers to a situation where some groups of people are seen as "untouchable" because their generation is one dedicated to the gods due to certain abomination committed by their forefathers and hence they cannot associate with the others especially in terms of marriage. Such association is seen as a contamination of a generation of pure blood with that of an impure blood. It is therefore a taboo.

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