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Abstract

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Historio-cultural and Womanist View in Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got her Head Chopped Off*.

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University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

Abstract

Liz Lochhead has taken the female writers' consciousness approach to unravel women's collective imagination in a multi-faceted psychic replay of myth and history in her plays especially in Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off (1989). This gives Lochhead the opportunity to reconstruct her views of female discourse, female position and female historical position within the patriarchal society. Through the textual analysis of her work, Lochhead problematizes the positioning of her female characters in socio-cultural hierarchy through the prism of language use. Some of the themes treated in this paper, show that Lochhead's play can be reanalysed from Alice Walker womanist theory which has over the years been applied to the works of African-American and African women writers alone.

In analysing Lochhead's works, readers need to resituate the socio-cultural ideology that affect the creation of her female characters and the problem they encounter within the socio-political history in order not to consider her works in abstraction. This is because the playwright creates female characters that provide important insight into women's experiences and the study of history that can empower women and also help readers to appreciate her works better from the historical, political, socio-cultural and linguistic perspectives. The analysis of Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (in further text: MQS) (1989) will focus on the formal/informal, active/passive, rigid/flexible and public/domestic views of language embedded in the construction of female characters in these plays. This will help bring out the benefits and the dangers of either acquiring or rejecting 'masculine' forms of language as Lakoff (1998, p.243) observes that:

... a girl is damned if she does, damned if she does

not. If she refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine: if she does learn, she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in a serious discussion: in some sense, as less than fully human. These two choices; to be less than a woman or less than a person- (sic), are highly painful.

Lakoff refers to the humiliation women experience in the society if they either learn or refuse to learn the so-called 'public' language as a prerequisite for their cultural acceptability. This idea is explored through the analysis of two different categories of women which Lochhead creates in her play. These include those characters who take on male attributes with unforeseen consequences and those who remain within culturally clear guides about their sexual and traditional female roles. The latter is seen by Walker (1984) as the evidence of women's cultural capability and assertiveness in the society that has rendered them powerless through their language use. Therefore, the play in this paper will be analysed from two different perspectives; the Historical/Cultural perspective and the Womanist perspective

These two perspectives depict how women in the same society deal with conflicts that come their way. The play reveals the interconnectedness between these two different perspectives and how women are treated with contempt and silence due to domestic cultural expectations within the society. Lochhead presents readers with a crippled life of female loneliness, back-breaking labour and the desperate search for a voice either as a child or an adult female. Some of the female characters in the plays are crushed by their use of language whereby they are physically and mentally strewn with societal imbalance, emotionally battered and linguistically victimised through the oppressive sexist language and social system that calls for the silent women with cultural domestic expectations.

Unlike Erikson's (1959) observation that explains the stage of intimacy versus isolation which happens between the age of twenty and forty five years when identity versus role confusion stage is

coming to an end, this playwright questions if people only search for identity during their adolescent years. This is because as women in patriarchal societies, bio-psycho-social forces are at work which makes female individuals unable to establish their own identities, thus creating a sense of isolation which sometimes make them sacrifice beyond their abilities in order to align with the socio-cultural norms. Such view is seen in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* whereby Ogwoma's freedom to marry a man of her choice is forfeited, rather she is given away to the man who is able to pay her bride price which is used to cure her sick brother.

Historical/Cultural Perspective

Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, produced by Comunicado in 1987 at the Lyceum Studio in Edinburgh to mark the 400th anniversary of Queen Mary of Scots, who died in 1547 traces back the herstory of female dislocation within the historical presentation of different generations. The play does not only deal with the dramatic presentation of Queen Mary of Scotland's life from a female writer's perspective, it does explore different level of marginalisation of women within the Scottish history, within the British feminist history and within the nationalist debates. With Lochhead's play, readers see another side of Scottish history that has either been suppressed or misrepresented. Lochhead's use of language in the play makes it more interesting to read than the historical presentations of other writers such as Nancy Bryson Morrison's biography of Mary Stuart and Edwin Muir's 1940s exploration from the patriarchal perspectives. Horvat (1999, p.41) observes that Lochhead's version of Mary departs from conventional portrayals, although the play on the whole remains sympathetic towards its heroine. Lochhead's play retraces the role of women in history and in contemporary society to empower her female characters' identities as a means of making a clear political statement. Also, Zenzinger (1991, p.128) views Lochhead's MQS as a play that:

underlines the problems of women in power, especially their difficulties in over-coming

indoctrinated ideas of female submissiveness using the dramatic device of having the roles of queens and serving maid played in turn by the same actress which allows the readers to see that lots of women are reclaiming ambitions, intelligence and affirmation as part of female qualities. The doubling of these two female characters reveals the dichotomies of child and adult, queen and commoner and victor and victims that create a form of identity shifts in the play. Thus, it helps them to rise against certain limitations and get involved in civic, social and cultural debates that they never have been deemed fit to contribute to.

Lochhead's non-naturalistic, often ironic, presentation and the way in which she constructs actions show human ability to make different choices when given the same situation. The playwright shows there is a form of change going on in the socio-cultural communities which depict her state of mind and that of most people. This is evidenced in Lochhead's Elizabeth and Mary responding in very different ways to the same proposals and challenges. McCulloch (2000) describes this approach as eclectic in the sense that it makes use of a variety of presentational styles such as expressionistic, epic, storytelling, anachronistic, breaking down the fourth wall, direct - to - the audience style of presentation. This dramatic style calls for Bertolt Brecht's 'verfremdungseffekt' which allows readers to actively engage in a critical relationship with the play, refocus on the message of the play, shatters the illusion of realism and to consciously put a new outlook to old stories. Lochhead dramatises this effect through the character of John Knox in the play that gives readers the opportunity of thinking afresh about what is happening and to question opinions and actions. Knox is portrayed as an abusive man who sees women as being evil, unintelligent and dependent on men, while he also view Catholicism as a way of revering women through the Virgin Mary within the reo Mary's spiritual mother as a means of re-evaluating women religious realm.

Lochhead creates in readers a distancing effect through La Corbie's poetic tributes tther than the acceptance of John Knox

representation of women. This helps prepare the readers' minds to question the relationship between myth and truth in Scotland's history, hence looking at the characters of the two queens from a fresh perspective. Scullion (2000, p.96) notices that "Lochhead's MQS has emerged as a centre-piece in subsequent dramatic and critical considerations of the relationships between history and historiography, national identity and nationalism, and gender identity and feminism". The way in which Lochhead dramatises MQS mirrors Yorke's (1991, p.10) term 'feminist history' that the history written by women will not be true history but will be reconstructed, remembered out of the exclusions and negations of patriarchy, and will be written by those who play out their lives 'between symbolic systems, in the interstices offside'. Lochhead's portrayal of history aims to rewrite the lost part of female myths and legends and to represent femininity in line with oral tradition.

In relation to Yorke's view, not only has Lochhead reconstructed the socio-political history of Scottish people, she also explores themes of power struggles, the longing for love, envy, female vulnerability and religious bigotry. The links of these themes is explored in the character of La Corbie whose dramatic lines reveal the dynamism and truism in the history of Scotland that help the readers create their own personal his/herstories. She is depicted as an ever present character who serves as a constant reminder of the Scottish cultural tradition through the songs she renders from the 16th century. Lochhead does not only use language to expose the rivalry between the two queens, their curiosity to know about each other and the difficulties they experience in their attempt to rule as female leaders in strong patriarchal societies, but also uses La Corbie's role to reanalyse the history written by women through her cynical deconstructive long opening monologue of the Scottish history.

Womanist Perspective

In Scottish female history, Breitenbach (1997) concludes in her book that Scottish women's roles are downplayed due to the power of Victorian domestic ideology. The influence of this ideology is still in operation to date which affects the historians view about a woman whereby certain privileges are accorded to the identity of wife and

mother, of the domestic, nurturing and caring role over the woman in public life, who is either a political representative, or a participant in industrial or class struggles. In order to re-address Scottish women's dispossessed cultural past, a review of some aspects of culture plays a very significant role in the shaping of things through the analysis of Lochhead's MQS. As the playwright portrays female development within the society, she also shows how the society thwarts and disrupts the female psyche by dictating their powerlessness.

The cultural expectation of women and the 'other' elates a wife's honour to extreme ignorance and cultural domestic expectations such as sewing, quilting, praying, spinning, and to love the man to whom she pledged her allegiance no matter the situation. The other in this play exposes the colonised coming to terms with their colonised mentality and trying to break away from such tradition that they feel have inhibited them. Although Walker's womanist theory recognises these female domestic works as forms of feminine aesthetics, she also sees them as a product of powerful imagination creating, connection and reconciliation through writings and histories.

In relation to Walker's definition of womanism, womanism can be viewed from two ends. On the one hand, Walker addresses the racist and classist aspects of white feminists and actively opposes separatist ideologies thus allowing the non-middle class white women to be included in the theory. On the other hand, she celebrates the cultural aspect of all women's lives, represented by their own language in order to correct the negative images placed on them. This is evident in Lochhead's creation of her two female characters, Mary and Elizabeth which will be explored later in the paper.

While Walker sees black women as people wanting to know more, people who are always in pursuit of knowledge despite their deprivation in a male dominated society, she questions the epistemological exclusion they endure in intellectual life in general and in feminist scholarship in particular. The construction of Walker's womanism and the several definitions she used is an attempt not only to situate the black woman in history and culture, but also any group of marginalised women in a male dominated society. Thus she engages to rescue the marginalised woman from the negative and inaccurate stereotypes that mask her in the feminist discourse, Walker's

(1984, pp.xi-xii) definitions that womanism is:

the black folk expression of mothers to female children, you acting womanish, i.e. like a woman. . . usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or wilful behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. . . (A womanist is also) a woman who loves other women sexually and/or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture . . . and women's strength . . . committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist. . .

This is visible in Lochhead's MQS whereby Queen Mary represents the young woman who is in pursuit of more knowledge and eager to know more about her culture, the men in her life, her role as a queen, her cousin, Queen Elizabeth amongst other things. Womanism considers men as part of the women's life and calls for the collaboration of racial, economic, emotional and cultural divergences amongst all women. In view of this, Lochhead celebrates womanist theory as a way of expressing her female characters both in the private and public realm that allow them recover some of their lost confidences, herstories and tradition of femininity. This helps to give voice to the marginalised female gender both in history and at present whereby such characters are able to readdress their view of femininity in relation to socio-cultural and historio-political values.

Such view makes womanism another radical twist to feminism through which the 'other' women are encouraged to take part in the female discourse. According to Kaplan (1996, p.125), she views Alice Walker as a writer working within the recuperative, archaeological tradition of feminist criticism; who has dedicated herself to uncovering the voices of women she calls "crazy saints. . . our mothers and grandmothers. . . who died with their real gifts stifled within them". Owing to Kaplan's observation, Walker (1984) agrees that she digs up lots of stories of forgotten women writers who were never widely acknowledged or were merely recognised in the literary

world. Walker's theory becomes crucial to this analysis as a way of each writer writing the missing parts to the other writer's story which Lochhead has successfully done in order to rewrite the female herstory from the female perspective. Such writings help women writers to recreate the universe by telling their own stories to the world in their own voices through their use of assertive language. This notion reiterates Onwueme's (2012, p.45) view that no matter how much empathy and creative vision any of the male writers may have in reconstructing the African woman, their product of her would remain an "artefact" of woman/womanhood. This is because the male writers write from the outsider-observer perspective. However, women should be encouraged to write their own stories in their own words since they are the women that they write about and the women they recreate from the point of an insider-observer. Just like Odi (2014, p. 648) noticed about Irene Salami Agunloye's writings, that Agunloye's powering of female character is a clarion call to women all over the world, analysing a Scottish female writer's work through Walker's womanist theory shows that females encounter almost the same issues no matter the colour, shape, language, sizes, ethnicity amongst many others in the world.

Language in MQS

In adopting a new outlook to her female characters, Lochhead employs language to create new perception of femininity. In MQS, she offers a variety of language registers which are formal and informal, standard and colloquial which McCulloch (2000, p.16) views that:

Lochhead's range of Scots language is most exciting.

She explains further that Lochhead's mixture of languages and language registers present in *Mary Queen of Scots* is because the play is about Scotland and England.

McCulloch's observation reiterates this paper's assumption that Scots

language is perceived as informal language by the users of English language which is depicted in Lochhead's MQS. Hence, if Scots language in the play is seen as informal, its use implies resistance to the dominant language and culture to present subversive voices. Lochhead plays with three different languages in MQS whereby she uses the mixture of French, Scots and English languages to show a versatile knowledge and dynamicity in her historical, cultural, social and academic understanding. Although Mary's use of Scots depicts her as the marginalised group, she is empathised with throughout the play as she is unable to recover from the perplexities of her language use which should have created a link to her national identity in relation to history, culture and society. This is shown in Act One scene two of MQS where Ambassador 1 and Ambassador 4 speak both formal and informal languages to address both Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary.

Ambassador 1: (To Elizabeth) To the most esteemed royal court of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth of England from His Majesty King Philip of Spain whose hand in marriage ... (13)

On contrary, Ambassador 4 uses the mixture of French and English when addressing Queen Mary:

Ambassador 4: (To Mary) Felicitations, Madame la plus belle Reine Marie d'Ecosse from Catherine de' Medici, la reine de France, Mere du roi Charles, who wishes you consider her son Henri de Valois. (13).

These linguistic binary forms between the two queens' show a relationship based on superiority and inferiority which is noticeable in the Commons' replies as well. The language difference is significant for the development of the relationship between the two queens which helps the readers to decipher the strengths and weaknesses associated with each female character. Elizabeth uses a more confident 'superior' formal language as a clear indication that

she has assumed a masculine role. This in turn may represent an exclusion of the female gender from the political realm, but at the same time such formal use of language launches Queen Elizabeth into the political consciousness of her kingdom and Britain as a whole. This signals her knowledge and involvement in taking full authority of her court.

With the use of formal-public language by Elizabeth, Lochhead rejects the notion that language is a tool of male-dominated culture and that it constructs the female identity as weak. Instead, she explores the possibilities of language becoming a tool of empowerment for women. Not only does she see the duality of language to construct female identity as both strong and weak in MQS, Lochhead shows the differences between the two queens and also exposes the difficulty of Elizabeth accepting her cousin's reign through both Queens use of formal and informal language, her mixed culture and her subtle nature. Scullion (2000) observes that MQS energises the discourse of nostalgia through a distinctive dramaturgical iconoclasm and sophisticated linguistic usage that set out a political feminist intent to interpret the past and draw out a new and radical agenda for the contemporary audience.

Although Lochhead uses language as a form of national identity, it also reveals the hierarchical position of most characters within the society. The use of the colloquial, informal and flexible Scots versus the formal, standard and rigid English language mirrors Fisherman's (1976, p.4) analysis that language choice should be a 'constructive self-identification'. For example, this constructive self-identification can be explored from the characterisation of both heroines in MQS as they use linguistic and visual opposites in the play to elaborate their different identities and monarchical powers. Lochhead's Mary's dynamicity helps her to assimilate the norms of Scots speech easily despite her French background while Elizabeth maintains her rigid physical and formal speech utterances. To Elizabeth, Scots is not an accepted language, as shown in her conversation with Marian about Mary's identity:

- Elizabeth:** What are her other amusements?
Marian: She writes poems apparently...
Elizabeth: Poems? In English?
Marian: In French. And in 'Scots'. (Scornful laughs)
(17-18)

Lochhead's use of inverted commas to differentiate Scots shows the disapproval of Elizabeth and her courts to the Scots, but Mary's inquisitiveness, longing and eagerness to meet Elizabeth whom she hopes will be accommodating in her discussion with her maid, Bessie seem quite different as said earlier. Such differences in language and characterisation switches from these two queens reflects Lakoff's (2005, p.243) assertion that shifting from one language to another requires special awareness to the nuances of social situations special alertness to possible disapproval. This displays the control of the dominant culture over the less privileged, suppressive, submissive and unequal category that is not recognised as an equal 'partner' in communication. In other words, a dominant culture only recognises the suppressed culture if it uses the dominant culture's language, but as the latter can never make this language their own completely, they can never be seen as equal. Lochhead's portrayal of Mary arouses pity in the readers due to her lack of knowledge about the British politics and lack of friendship from her cousin who should have enlightened her about the political system. Lochhead exposes Mary's longings, disorientation, boredom, imagination through her bewildered responses to her new situation, Lochhead shows her boredom; marginalization and fear for her kingdom, her courts and the country she feels will help reintroduce her into the British political system:

Mary: Three years! I mind and the Marie soot on deck
Chitterin' in oor fine French frocks peerin' through
The glaur o' the air ae glimpse o' my kingdom! Three
years and I havena seen it yet!...
Haar fae the sea...cauld...rebecks and chanterse
Pretty masque and a goldhaired bairn present me wi' a
filigree hert that's fu o' golden coins, new minted.

Clouds. A flytin' fae Knox. Daukness. A revel!

Smoke... a banquet for the canongate, a bloody clash
at the Butter Tron, a murdered bairn in the
Grassmarket, sunshine, and a ragged, starvin' crowd
o' cheerin' weans jostle to touch ma velvet goon as I go
by. My kingdom.

Alternatively brutal and boring. And I canny mak
sense o it at a' (16-17).

The playwright does not only dramatise Mary's plight, but exposes the fear and marginalisation of women entering into the public sphere to assert themselves either as leaders or career driven and assertive females in the patriarchal society. Mary becomes an embodiment of nature and culture as she is considered to be traditionally inferior, substandard and weaker both in mind and body which make her to be seen as the 'other' woman. Her situation reveals how 'other' women become outcasts as they try to assert themselves and use their voices while they are made victims in the male dominating society.

However, Mary's isolated position disallows her from finding a solution to the personal and political problem of her kingdom and of John Knox. While Elizabeth's charisma and language shows her disregard for the Scottish tradition in relation to the reign of her cousin in Scotland, Mary in her loneliness is frustrated with her court. Elizabeth refers to Mary as 'our bloody dead sister's widow?' (13) at a point in the play which emphasises that there is a form of false sisterhood in her sense of femaleness. Historically, the lines above also remind readers of Mary Stuart as the representation of Catholicism in power. Mugglestone (1993, p.94) says that:

conflicting patterns of language serve to signify the wider issues in distance and solidarity... language use in Scotland is therefore highly complex in the schema of differentiation it offers; and it is presumably this circumstance which leads Lochhead to assert the supreme value of Scots as a 'language for multiplicity of registers' (verse 93) and for the foregrounding of social, gendered and geographical divisions, the

modulations of voice and register which inevitably accompany every exchange. It is certainly an aspect which Lochhead herself explores and exploits, to a considerably extent in her own work, drawing upon the emblematic aspects of language as a symbol of national identity in *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*.

Mugglestone notices that language and gender are two biased issues in Scottish intellectual and cultural life that inhibits female assertion within their public-political identity. This inhibition makes Scottish women to be in active search of national identity as a means of eliminating their stereotypes in Scotland and Britain as a whole.

Lochhead uses language as a form or link to national identity in order to portray her connection with history, culture and the society in general. Mary's portrayal of dislocated identity is similar to the problem Eulalie encounters in Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of A Ghost* where the culture she feels will accommodate her seems too alien to accept or tolerate her.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the victims of identity crisis in the light of historio-cultural and womanist points of view which shows Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* can be analysed from the womanist view. While the playwright recognises that the society is a valuable source of language development, she also shows the underlying problems of women in power. Lochhead integrates historical pageant and tragedy to explore themes such as bigotry, rivalry, sexism, court intrigue and human psychology as a way of using contemporary understanding to re-analyse history in the form of language. Her female characters, Mary and Elizabeth become psychologically damaged as they are made to be victims while they try to learn and employ public language which buttressed Lakoff's (1998) assertion as mentioned earlier in the paper. Lochhead demonstrates that the use of language can help to express diverse cultural identities and help to re-address women herstory that has long been neglected or told in favour of the male gender.

This selected Scottish writer, Liz Lochhead, has buttressed the idea that the issue of women's subordination, inclusion and exclusion of women from the community narrative domain is a common replay of any patriarchal society. Similar to African women's writers' view, she has been able to share common interests and identities as a way of expressing women's disillusionment and marginalisation in her own society. However, other plays like Rona Munro's *Bold Girls*, Sue Glover's *Bondagers*, Liz Lochhead's *Educating Agnes* and Marcella Evaristi's *Mouthpieces* amongst many others should also be explored in like manner in order to show the exploitations and limitations of the Scottish women. Thus, MQS is a play that has reset the role of women in history and in contemporary times. The playwright's language use has seen to the structuring and ordering of different experiences, knowledge, expectations and status to address gender oppression and psychological bondage.

Also, Lochhead MQS analysis shows that some elements of Walker's womanism such as capability, audaciousness, and wholeness can cross the African and African-American shores to be used in analysing some European plays. This shows that most women writers globally clearly advocate for the eradication of the existing traditions that oppress, degrade, exploit and endanger women.

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