

EXPOSITION OF A GENDERED CULTURE IN TWO SELECTED NIGERIAN MALE PLAYTEXTS

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Introduction

Increasingly, one notices that the African culture depicts women as metaphor for colonial exploitation and subjugation which makes the selected writers present character stereotypes with damaged self-image trying to correct the assumed imperfection of their gender. Although writing outside the female body, these two male writers look into their socio-cultural history, often developed from a male point of view to re-evaluate female situations. Female issues such as women's lifestyles, masculinity, motherhood, gendered beings, poverty, and connections between the women's body, sexuality and representation are explored in their works.

Although different thematic preoccupations such as woman's position in society and how this position affects her perception of identity and determination, her cultural vulnerability, her apathy and tolerance within and outside of home, the politics involved in woman's language, the quest for self-actualisation, expression of her sexuality, and motherhood have been identified in the selected plays, yet, these male writers only writes from the male perspective trying to document what women go through. It is important to note that women writers' write with sincere passion, zeal and commitment because they are the ones experiencing the gendered situation but a male writer only writes from what he sees, hears and thinks. However, this paper identifies two forms of women oppression within the patriarchal society. These include:

- (i) Sexism
- (ii) Classism

To an African feminist and womanist writer, these two are inextricably bound together and cannot be ignored in the exploration of the female gender. Although this categorisation of oppression also includes the men in the society in some aspect, yet the women are the ones who bear most of the brunt. While this paper sees that sexist language not only shows men and women differently, it also shows them as unequal especially to the disadvantaged women. Sexism in language exists in the plays because the playwright explores how language devalues the women and foster gender based dominance which invariably promotes the idea of male supremacy and superiority.

Also, classism in the selected plays shows a system of differential treatment based on social class/perceived social class that exposes the avenue of oppression of the subordinated class (women, in this case) supported by beliefs and cultural attitudes that places people according to their social, economic, educational, family, job status amongst many other things. While the playwrights portray all these through their female characters, they also allow the readers/audience to see how these women are able to navigate a patriarchal system that objectifies women.

Womanhood and Exploitation in Olu Obafemi's *Pestle and the Mortal*

The play deals with the dramatic presentation of women from a socio-cultural view of femininity. Using the metaphor of speaking in alien language, Obafemi explores his writing from the female perspective different from the male writers' technique of presenting their female characters. Obafemi based this Nigerian play in a positive but ironic way to sympathize with the heroine who does not concur with the societal expectation. He presents an outspoken lady full of zeal, ambition and determination to effect a change in the society that has a stereotyped expectation of womanhood but is later crushed in the system she intends to change. Obafemi presented to his audience Lola, a willful young beauty, who

refuses to limit herself to the traditional expectation of femalehood in the society because she wants a fulfilled life of affluence, freedom to make her own life choices with a man she truly loves and chooses, and not being forced to marry a man arranged by her father, nor to marry the teacher she sees as a local celebrity. Lola looks into the future rather than the compressing culture that regards women as voiceless, powerless and restricts them to the domestic sphere which she refers to as "a still water that never moves" (Obafemi, 1999, p. 10).

Against her parents and the societal expectations, Lola leaves the village to meet her fiancée in Lagos, but becomes disappointed with Lagos life style. Far from her expectation of a rosy and affluent life in Lagos with what she has heard about and seen in the papers, she becomes a victim of Lagos "bottom power". This is a situation which allows a woman to trade her body as an exchange to have what she wants to some extent from a man who has the power to give but will not release it until he sleeps with her. With such an incidence, Obafemi also exposed the socio-political greed of the Nigerian society that makes a certain group of people acquire wealth through cheap labour. The character of Musa refers to this in the play.

MUSA: No, I have not built a house yet. Oh my dear, you were expecting a flat or a mansion or something. I see. Not even a commissioner or a business executive can boast of that here. Well, well, may be a Senator or a Minister can dream of such lofty ideals, that is if he spends his numerous estates and allowances from his numerous official trips on such things as housing (p. 12).

The playwright explored the social incapability of women in terms of their joblessness that leads them to prostitution, and falling victims of religious bigot. Although Obafemi's use of language created a view of Walker's concept of femininity, but still made women to be taken as victims of the patriarchal culture which disallows them from asserting themselves. He developed these female characters as determined people who are suppressed because of their lack of voice which Walker saw as women's capability in womanist theory.

Walker's analysis of women's strength, capability and independence as opposed to

gender separatism found in the feminist theory makes Obafemi fits into Walker's womanism. Apart from the womanish attributes found in Lola's characterisation, another level of womanism that exists in the play is the collaboration and co-existence between a man and a woman to create a peaceful society to a large extent. This is regarded as the survival of the community where the fates of a woman and a man are inextricably interwoven. The vivid example is the character of Lola before she becomes a victim to the patriarchal culture that acquires women as properties. Obafemi represented the female characters in the play as weak, financially incapable and emotional victims of their assumed dependence on men. This coincides with Kumah's (2000) notion that the white middle-class feminists constitute a coherent group of women with identical interests and stereotyped view of third world women as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition bound, domestic and family oriented" as opposed to their white middle-class counterparts who are regarded as "educated, modern and having control of their body and sexuality". Kumah's assertion identifies that these effects continually limit the third world women's notion of themselves and their possibilities which lend credence to Obafemi's depiction of Lola, Mosun and Susan. Consciously or unconsciously, the playwright offered an avenue of women becoming aware of their situation and plight through the language employed to create suitable lives for themselves but paradoxically engage themselves as prostitutes to be financially viable since they believe there is no any other way out of their financial constraint.

Analysing the play from the perspective of Walker's theory of womanism, Lola is depicted as a young girl with womanish nature from the beginning of the play. Walker (1984, p. x) defined "acting womanish" as "the folk expression" used by black female adults to describe young girls who were overly curious, "audacious", and eager to enter the world of the grown-ups. This is the term Allan (1995, p. 70) observed that its origin from West African's "Big Woman" pronounced as "Big Ooman". This refers to the sassy demeanour of

young females. Allan (1995, p.70) asserts that:

For Walker, the battle against patriarchal society and its multiple sins of sexism, racism, classism and homophobia (amongst others) needs the womanist spirit of defiance and irreverence, on the one hand, and the desire for social integration on the other hand.

The women in this play are crushed by their use of language whereby they are physically and mentally battered, victimised by the oppressive system that sees nothing valuable in a woman except their bodies which are used as an exchange rate for what they want under a corrupt patriarchal system. Mosun's lines in her explanation of Lagos life to Lola that:

Mosun: To get job here both the head and the body must work together
(Obafemi, 1999, p. 22).

This reveals Lola as an innocent and an ignorant girl who knows absolutely nothing about the social adjustability of the Lagos life for a woman to use her bodily worth to get financial value. Obafemi used Lola's expression of Lagos life naivety to Mosun and Susan in the play to expose the societal confinement of a woman who is unaware of what men value in a woman. Lola's introductory meeting with Alhaji Hassan examines walker's definition of woman's capability and integration to express feminine emotion which is later used against her.

The playwright's aim in creating these outspoken female characters who are crushed by the socio-cultural expectations of femininity may be an exploration of females as their own mouthpieces that of the problems of women in the contemporary society. It also showcases the problem of women as victims either as mothers, wives, barrens, intellectuals and ignorant under the male constructed society which is analysed in the characterisation of the two women at the beginning of the play. These two female characters play a significant role in the development of the whole play.

They depict a generation of women who do not want total changes and expects the

stereotyped cultural obligations from all females compared to the Lagos ladies who Lola encounters. While discussing Lola and Folake in their recall of how femininity used to be, the women's language depicts their observations of girls as innocent virgins, cultural domesticity and reveals the unsatisfying nature in men in their lines that:

1st Woman:

(she joins the memory game) Oh yes, how nice it was, watching damse's wriggling their waists with bright smiles and glittering sweats. And the men, oh the wife-hunting bastards. You could see in their roving eyes coveting the smooth backsides of the innocent virgins (p. 3).

Also, Obafemi used the two women to reiterate the significance of culture in Nigerian society, how culture shapes society and social relationships, and how it underlies the gender inequalities by bestowing more value on male gender. Okoh (2003) saw such cultural values as coercive, oppressive, enslaving and dehumanising to femalehood which claims to command obligations and respects that create a good society at the detriment of women.

While the title of the play "Pestle on the Mortar" symbolises women's domesticity in Nigerian society, Lagos in the play is used metaphorically to depict a level of exposure for the feminine gender which is explored in Lola's character compared to that of her sister, Folake, who stays in the village to be betrothed to her father's choice of husband. Historically, pestle and mortar is used for food preparation which is culturally presented to the newly wedded bride as one of the valuable gift in her husband's house to depict a woman's place in the kitchen in some part of Nigeria. Lola's reference of the city life shows a woman who is ready for social, academic, cultural, emotional and financial changes. She sees it as an avenue that will allow her to get educated, work and earn her own money in order to help out with the family's finances, and have a lifestyle she desires. Unfortunately, this leads to her untimely death which is predicted by the two women at the beginning of the play,

because she refuses to accept her biological and traditional role as a woman.

Obafemi examines women's indecision and exploitation through Lola's character retracing her steps back to her former young lover Musa. The content of the letter that implies an uneasy combination of love and expediency to produce a state of mixed feelings which Lola writes to him to break the relationship is repeatedly echoed in Musa's mind to create an analysis of love and hunger being strange bed-fellows for the readers, and how femininity can be viewed with indecision. Musa regards Lola as a wayfarer, gaining sudden momentary knowledge; coming to him without a mind of her own (p.33) is significant to Aidoo's (1970, p.37) description of her protagonist, Anowa with the tragic end. In Anowa's own words:

People can be very unkind. A wayfarer is a traveler. Therefore, to call someone a wayfarer is a painless way of saying he does not belong. That he has no home, no family, no village, no stool of his own, has no feast days, no holidays, no state, no territory.

Aidoo reference's to Anowa as a wayfarer signifies a woman without a destination, a decision and a slave being owned in the society to celebrate men's accumulation of wealth, and women who are denied freedom of action and the use of their voice. Lola's encounter with Alhaji Hassan reveals the treatment of a woman as a wayfarer. Alhaji Hassan sends Lola packing after using her to satisfy his societal ego before she becomes pregnant. He claims to be a saint to the world without any form of social injustice which is a total lie that Obafemi uses to expose his representation of religious bigotry that beclouds the Nigerian understanding of religiosity. Alhaji Hassan regards himself as:

Hassan: I am a clean, stainless man, don't forget, a holy Alhaji. A man of my calibre does not associate with dirt and filth. As a public figure, I must be seen, or at least thought, to be decent (p. 35).

This is the situation of a patriarchal man who claims to be clean, sinless and stainless at

the expense of the young females he defiles in the society. His secretary, Ngozi shows his detest to this attitude, because she sees the girls as sexual preys and Alhaji Hassan as "Agba Iya" meaning a "worthless old fool" who sleeps with young girls of his granddaughter's age without any remorse. Ngozi's use of the proverb "when will the hawk cease playing pranks with freshly hatched chicks?" reveals that her disgust for Alhaji's behaviour in the treatment of these young girls links back to Obafemi's use of the two women who view men as "wife-hunting bastards", and are never satisfied with what they have but roving their eyes to covet the innocent virgins in the society.

Although Obafemi characterised Alhaji Hassan as a patriarchal man who sees exploitation of women as socially acceptable; he still allows him the language to involve his sexual preys in the public domain. While Lola assumes she likes dancing, singing and writing poems that reminds the readers of the oral tradition of the disseminating messages from one generation to the other in the cultural setting, Hassan's reference to night clubs and film houses for a woman to relax reveals an attitude to a woman that does not relegate her to the kitchen, a possibility for a woman to be loved in return and to be treated equally in public domain by a man.

Obafemi portrayed female characters as the subjects of male sexual desires. Through Musa's character, the playwright identified his involvement in the female academic discourse. Despite being a man in a typical male oriented African society, he created lines that speak of the social, cultural and political perspective of women in his address to Alhaji Hassan to publicise the patriarchal decadence which turns a woman into a "used and dumped" object. However, while considering *Pestle on the Mortar* from the womanist perspective, one should not be ignorant of the fact that both womanist and feminist theories are studying and analysing female issues from two different views—the western and African perspectives.

Womanhood and Marginalisation in Femi Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath*

To call Femi Osofisan a feminist/womanist writer is not a mistaken statement, but readers need to be conscious of the fact that he engages in human stories that often critique the political, economic, and socio-cultural involvement of the society which mostly support female marginalisation. While male writers such as Olu Obafemi, Ahmed Yerma, Bayo Afolabi also explore women's exploitation in some of their plays, Osofisan presents the theme of women marginalisation and subordination. Osofisan engages with the issue of women subjugation that publicises their invisibility within the society. Adeoti (2010, p. 29) observes that Osofisan:

presents an alternative vision of social order, achieved through revolution – a new society where Africa is no longer held hostage by tyranny, privation, corruption, illiteracy, diseases and violent conflicts. Consequently, his drama is primed to motivate social actions against social ills.

As one of the prolific postcolonial playwright in Africa especially in Nigeria, Adeoti's observation shows that Osofisan uses his works to call for equal distribution of wealth, elimination of women subjectivity, call for women empowerment and the fight against socio-cultural injustice within the society. As noticed in most of his plays such as *Moruntodun*, *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest*, *Tegonni*, *Altine's Wrath*, Osofisan advocates feminine identity that will help women see themselves as people with voice, dignity and autonomy. As a male writer in a patriarchal society, his view of feminism can be analysed as trying to put men and women on the same socio-cultural level in order for the latter to attain equality like their male counterparts. However, in Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath* (1986), women's subordination is greatly discussed. Altine is presented as a wife, mother and a woman whose voice is silenced from the beginning of the play, but at the end regains her audibility to fight against all unjust and inhuman treatment she has gone through in her matrimonial home. Her husband, Lawal, is seen as a man with vile words and disrespectful acts which makes her psychologically unbalanced and idiotic.

Lawal Why are you staring there like an idiot? The least you can do is say good

evening to her? Go on, greet her! [*Altine stares, silent. Lawal angrily hits her*]

I say greet her, you dumb female goat! Down! On your knees! [*Altine falls, and crawls as he kicks her. She drools in the mouth*]

Mariam [*turning away in disgust*] For God's sake, Lawal, let her go! Ah, an animal! (p. 6)

The dialogue between Lawal and his mistress, Mariam shows the disgust he has for the wife due to infidelity. Ogbonna and Udoka (2014, pp. 213, 214) assert that 'infidelity is a social malaise that is on the increase. Its infiltration into any family unit breaks the moral codes that bind its members. . . . infidelity is a vice and such should be nipped in the bud'. If it is not stopped early, it becomes a cankerworm that eats into the marriage.

In trying to give Altine the needed empowerment, Osofisan discusses patriarchy as an avenue through which women are enslaved within the society. This explains why Agunloye (2006, p.v) sees patriarchy or male domination as what is responsible for or as the root of women's oppression and inequality. Osofisan uses the metaphors of silence and audibility in the play to explore women's ability to either speak out against or condone the unpleasantness of the unjust socio-cultural, marital, economic and political issues associated with patriarchal society that does not allow women act on their own volition. Such situations either make or mar the women's future, as those who speak out against are seen as rebels and those who obey are defined by their limitations. Altine's character in *Altine's Wrath* represents the metaphors above which helps to redress female identity, women's position in the society, gendered relationships, self autonomy and self- expression. Altine's husband, Lawal Jatau, exhibits the pride of an African man within a patriarchal society who sees no worth in a woman except for her reproductive role (motherhood) and domestic roles. In his own words

while trying to belittle his wife, he condemns her, makes her feel worthless and useless:

Lawal: . . . she wasn't always like this! I mean, she could talk when I married her. As illiterate as any goat, but she talked. And the mistake I made was trying to teach her, to educate her! you see! Look at her there! You would think that she's just another normal, human being just to look at her. But you are indeed dead wrong! There is nothing in that head of hers at all, except sawdust! Sawdust, yes! I've never met anyone as dim-witted as this woman you're looking at. A complete dumb clot! oh I tried and tried! Once I even hired a teacher for her. But it was just a waste! All a waste! Because she never learnt a thing! Everything went through her head just like water passing through the sieve! (p.8)

Lawal's derogatory words towards his wife in the presence of his mistress shows him as a man who does not believe in woman freedom, rather he sees women as a decorated property to glorify his own self-worth. The conversation between Lawal and his mistress shows that women at times could be enemies of themselves:

Lawal Okay, off you go! That's enough! And let the food be quick! [Turns and sees Ahmed, who has returned, looking on]. And you, what are you standing there gaping for? Go and join her in the kitchen! . . . you see the kind of home I have! On one side, a stark illiterate of a wife, who's as dumb as that chair you're sitting on! and on the other, an imbecile of a houseboy! . . .

Mariam Well, I'm sorry for you. But if you'll just take my advice . . .

Lawal I know, I know. You want me to send her away. Okay, I've promised. But you see, it's not- well, you can't understand. Just give me time, my dear.

Mariam How long? Look, it's not me. I'm willing to wait. But you, it's you I'm worried about. I mean, to continue to live with this- . . . (p. 6)

Trying to get his wife educated is presented as one of the ways to promote his self-worth and to promote male domination. Historically, education has been a means of liberation to human beings especially to the deprived category. Lawal sees that despite his effort to get Altine educated, it is to no avail as she seems unteachable to him. Ironically, he is ignorant that all the while he thinks Altine is uneducated and an illiterate after beating her to coma, Altine has made extra efforts to make sure she is learned and can speak fluent English. Osofsan depicts education as an avenue to reconstructs voices of the oppressed, the disenfranchised, and the silenced. However, in relation to Walker's (1984, pp. 233-4) view of education, she sees that black women could be creative if only they are given the chance to be educated. She

reviewed how black people were deprived of formal education by questioning in 1984 that:

What does it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? In our great grandmothers' days? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood.... How creativity of the black woman was kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America it was a punishable crime for a black person to read and write.

To read and write will give the slaves the opportunity to re-examine their situations and give them a voice in the African American societies. Walker notices that, for a slave, literacy provides them with an opportunity to engage in a critical reflective dialogue regardless of the discussion. With reference to Walker, this observation is also explored by Cameron (1998, p.5) as she discusses the master-servant relationship that existed between the black servants and their white masters. This is similar to what Osofisan created in *Altine's Wrath*, the relationship that still exists between the female and male gender whereby to read and write creates an avenue of self-awareness, self-empowerment and self-autonomy for the female gender who is subjugated by the males in the society.

For a slave to read and write, and for anyone to teach him or her to do so, was not merely unlikely given the conditions of enslavement, it was specifically criminalised. This was not just one more petty humiliation inflicted by the master, but a calculated act of self-protection on his part. Powerful groups often fear that the ability to read and write, should it spread among the powerless, will give uncontrolled access to subversive ideas, and so facilitate critical thought, oppression and finally rebellion.

While education is a means of freedom to the powerless, Cameron (1998, p.5) notes that it also creates an act of rebellion in the mind of this deprived group. The deprivation from reading and writing is an act of silencing, but Walker (1984) views that womanism teaches women of different races that they are capable of change within the patriarchal and colonial society which is seen in the character of Altine, although not instant. While Lawal still feels his wife is an idiot, a dumb and an illiterate, Altine confronts her husband at the end by

speaking out, breaking the shackles of subordination and letting loose of her marginalisation:

Altine: Yes, my name is Altine, Master. You bought me nine years ago, remember? I was just a slave whom my father had put in the market for the highest bidder, you remember? So you bought me to bear your children, and scrub your floor, and wash your clothes. I cook your meals, and bow meekly when you exercise your lungs by barking. Or when it's your muscles you feel like testing, I lay down meekly and take the blows. Look at me; the memories of slavery are here in this bundle . . . (p.30)

Lawal's insensitivity makes him loose out at the end. Altine exemplifies a woman of tomorrow, a woman with a view of change, a woman with the attitude that can make a difference within the patriarchal society and a woman who is conscious of her limitations, but ready to negotiate such in order to redefine her circumstances. Her view of marriage changed when Lawal tests his manly energy on her through punches and shouts. Altine no longer sees any love in her marriage except for her husband's infidelity which is part of the egoistic nature of man in a patriarchal society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of Obafemi's *Pestle on the Mortar* and Osofisan's *Altine's Wrath* reveal the societal use of language to define, depreciate and demean women; and at the same time the playwrights efforts to use these languages to voice out, inspire resistance and rebellion against the negative meanings that are associated with femalehood in the society. However, Obafemi portrayed Lola as an adamant girl with the zeal and aspiration to make her own choice more than the other girls in the village, and presented to the readers an unacceptable female character whose behaviour appears alien in the patriarchal society. Also, Osofisan presented Altine, whose view about life and marriage at the beginning of the play is that of subjugation but later comes out of the exploited situation with the desire of change. While Obafemi arouses the sympathy of the readers with Lola's tragic end of becoming the victim of evil societal forces, Osofisan's tragic end of Altine is substituted by one of his students' contribution that believes Altine deserves to live after going through such agony.

However, both playwrights' choices of words are not subjugating but are rather exposing societal injustice on women to redress the issue of femininity through the language that hinders them which reiterates Walker's opinion on womanish child who is anxious, audacious and courageous to know more than others in order to help to build a society free of sexism, classism and racism. Therefore, their presentation of female characters with zeal, assertion, determination, expression and Walker's womanish view in the *Pestle on the Mortar* and *Alaine's Wrath* expose their awareness of female language and female situation which could be further explored in other plays as well.

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