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## DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH OF VOICELESSNESS OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN: JULIE OKOH'S *EDEWEDE (THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY)*

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### Abstract

The rural non-literate African woman is often perceived of as meek, docile, helpless and thus silent in the face of marginalization and other forms of oppression. Although Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues that this myth of the African woman is a creation of Western feminist texts, both Western and African (feminist) critics and literary artists are to a large extent responsible for the creation of such an image. Such a perception unnecessarily puts African culture on trial and leads to the erroneous belief that African cultures have nothing to offer feminism. The consequence of the above are misconceptions about the feminist intents in African texts. Julie Okoh in her play text *Edewede: The dawn of a new day* disproves this myth of the voicelessness of the (rural non-literate) African woman. And the play is examined in this paper employing the ideology which informed the formulation of Afro-centric feminist schools of thought, this paper examines how. The study asserts that Okoh's *Edewede* validates the notion that feminism exists in African culture and that the culture should thus be the informing principle in the choice of theory for use in the analyses of African texts, but also adds however that employing culture in the analyses of African texts does not necessarily preclude coalitions among women of different races.



## Introduction

African women are usually perceived as meek, helpless, docile and voiceless by Western feminists. Schipper (1987) and D'almeida (1994) believe that colonialism and patriarchy are responsible for the voicelessness of African women. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) contends that since middle class (Western-) educated women in the urban areas are not included in the referent 'African women', the term is usually applied only to non-educated rural women. She argues that the silence of African women is a creation of Western feminist texts asserting that they "fail to look for their (African women's) voices where could be found, in the *sites* and forms in which these voices are uttered" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 11). Therefore, there are avenues where women speak out and take action: at times even silence is speech.

The failure to look for these sites as Ogundipe-Leslie advocates leads to misconceptions not only about African culture but also about the feminist intents in African texts. It was such misconceptions about African culture and tradition that made 'older' female writers apprehensive of the 'feminist' label. This is in spite of the feminist consciousness in their writings. Buchi Emecheta once said that she was a feminist with a small 'f' (Emecheta, 1988) while Flora Nwapa once rejected the tag, accepted it and then rejected it again at different fora (Nnaemeka, 1995. See also Umeh, 1995). The same applies to Zaynab Alkali who does not like being labelled a 'feminist' (James, 1990). No doubt the misconceptions about feminism, some arising from the application of Western feminist theories in African literature, may have created the suspicion surrounding the word 'feminism'.

One of such misconceptions which Nnaemeka (1995) discusses is polygyny (or polygamy as it is widely but inaccurately referred to in Nigeria) which, she says, Western feminists such as Stratton (1994) tend to focus on and condemn uncritically in their analyses of African texts. Yet polygyny could be, and is, practised by



men in different forms and in different cultures including the West and its criticism by the Western world is therefore considered hypocritical (Nnaemeka, 1994). Indeed while polygyny may be abused in certain cases, the institution, generally, can be liberating for, rather than inhibitory to, African women. Some African feminists such as Acholonu (1995) maintain that while Western (and even some African) feminists speak of polygyny as if it is forced on African women and as an idea which destroys the dignity and self-respect of African women, it could also be seen as a response to certain peculiar needs in the African society and thus could be advantageous to African women. Acholonu (1995) cites some of its advantages for women include child care sharing, emotional and economic support, sisterhood and companionship. In discussing some of these advantages in Bimbo Adedokun's novel titled *Under The Brown Rusted Roofs* (2008), Aliyu-Ibrahim (2012) also reveals how the women characters manipulate the institution of polygyny to work for their own interests. Some of the characters' strategies include leaving the polygynous marriage; and choosing to remain in the polygynous marriage and either exploiting the sexual act to get their husbands' approval of their desires and wishes or taking a lover to fulfill sexual or maternal needs. Aliyu-Ibrahim (2012) concludes that rather than uncritically condemning polygyny, which is a practice that subsists to date, some of these strategies ought to be assessed and modified to address some of its problems especially as they impinge on the African woman. According to Aliyu-Ibrahim (2013), researching on how women have coped, and are still coping, with such challenging institutions as polygyny, proves that feminism exists and in various ways in the various cultures in Africa.

We intend to show how in showing some of her characters employing some aspects of culture to challenging some other oppressive aspects of culture, Okoh deconstructs the myth that the African woman is powerless and docile i.e. voiceless and thus proves that feminism is not alien to African culture.



### **Theoretical Framework**

The alienation encountered by Black American women during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s which centred on the oppression of the African American male and the isolation from Western feminisms which addressed mainly the problems of the White woman was the beginning of the negotiation of space in mainstream feminism for the recognition of non-Western experiences. Critics such as Walker (1983) and hooks (1991) called attention to the African American culture in discourses on the Black woman. This has led to the formulation of theories such as Walker's Womanism (1983) and Hudson-Weems' Africana-Womanism (2003) that are aimed at highlighting the peculiar challenges facing the African American woman and the possible solutions to these challenges.

African feminist critics who stressed that a theory on African feminisms must be rooted in the African culture followed the lead of Walker and consequently formulated Afro-centric feminist notions which they perceive as uniquely addressing the experiences of the African woman. Nigerian theorists are foremost in this regard and the most notable of these concepts include Stiwanism as propounded by Ogundipe-Leslie (1994); Motherism by Acholonu (1995); Womanism as proposed by Kolawole (1997) who was following Ogunyemi (1986); and Neco-feminism initiated by Nnaemeka (2003).

Aliyu (2013) asserts that what binds these diverse Afro-centric feminist schools of thought together is the notion that inherent in the various African cultures are structures and systems that permit the oppression of the woman and the idea that these need to be challenged to bring about the needed liberation. Aliyu (2013) argues further that these widely-acclaimed Afro-centric feminist theories cannot be wholly sufficient for use in the analyses of African texts. What is needed for the purposes of this paper is the idea that feminism is not foreign to African culture.



In this paper, we adopt Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) definition of culture as "the total product of a people's 'being' and 'consciousness' which emerges from their grappling with nature and living with other human beings in a collective group" (p. 25). It recognizes however that culture, as Kolawole (1998) emphasises, cannot be static; it is dynamic. It must be stressed here that African culture is heterogeneous.

### **Synopsis of *Edewede***

*Edewede* is a story whose actions are set in Otoedo community. The fictive community is located in present day Edo and Delta states of Nigeria. In Otoedo, female circumcision forms part of the initiation of young girls into adulthood. It is an accepted custom in the community before the play opens. As recounted by Ebikere, Edewede's mother-in law, the ceremony is a seven-day event in camp which is rounded off with celebrations involving the whole community. Death and various forms of illnesses however cast a shadow over these celebrations as the community usually loses some of the girls due to complications arising from circumcision. For instance, the reader is informed that Edewede loses her elder sister to circumcision (p. 19); Third Elder loses his twin sister while for Fourth Elder, it is his fiancée who never returns from the initiation camp (p. 56). These deaths and illnesses are, however, ascribed to the anger of the gods and such dead girls are denied the proper burial rites (p. 22). It is not until Izenebu, the first of Edewede's two daughters dies, that Edewede, for fear of losing the only child left, decides to speak out against circumcision.

Edewede's decision that her second daughter, Oseme will not be circumcised pitches her against her mother-in-law, Ebikere who represents the old order. The conflict between the two of them leads to other conflicts, first between Edewede and her husband, and later between Edewede (and the rest of the women in her age group) and



the community. Okoh uses the divergence in views between these characters to demonstrate the opportunities within the indigenous African culture that women explore to achieve their aims.

The refusal by Edewede that Oseme will not be circumcised makes both Ordia and his mother Ebikere to describe Edewede as stubborn, obstinate and dogged at getting what she wants. While Ordia admires this trait in his wife, Ebikere detests it. Ordia says thus of his wife: "You don't give up, stubborn goat... But you are stubborn" (p. 11). It is however instructive that Ordia loves his wife so much that for years, he ignores his mother's pleas that he marries a second wife. Ebikere on her part insinuates that Edewede's mother imparts her (Edewede's mother's) stubbornness on her daughter, Edewede (p. 7). This is in reference to the assistance that Edewede gets from her (Edewede's) mother the first time that she decides to challenge the custom and tradition of her people by exploring opportunities in the same custom and tradition to negotiate what she desires.

### Deconstructing the Myth of African Women's Voicelessness

To this date, in some African cultures, the practice of parents choosing a husband for their daughter persists. The first time Edewede challenges tradition is when her father tells her that he has chosen as husband for her, i.e. the son of Itua. However, rather than the son of Itua, Edewede prefers Ordia and begs her mother to assist her marry the man she loves:

**EDEWEDE:** Even so he is the right man for me.

**MOTHER:** How do you know that? Just from seeing him in the market?... You don't even know if he is one of those procurers or even a ghost prowling the markets.

**EDEWEDE:** It doesn't matter. He is going to be my husband some day. That, I know for sure. ... Mother, I have made up my mind. It is either I marry him or I remain at home forever...



**MOTHER:** Oh no! Do not drag me into your scheme. You should be ashamed of yourself: A girl rejecting the spouse chosen for her by her father. Unheard of! (p.27).

Edewede's mother finally agrees to assist her daughter to talk to her father about it. The fact that Edewede has been married to Ordia for years and is living happily in the community by the time the play begins shows that Edewede succeeds in marrying the man of her choice. Thus Okoh demonstrates that in spite of the fact that in African culture, it is customary for a girl's parents to choose a husband for her, the culture is not rigid, neither is it static and that it does allow for negotiation or deviation.

*Edewede* serves as an alternative to such texts modeled after the popular African folktale which tell of the dire circumstances awaiting the girl who decides to choose her own husband in opposition to her parents' choice. Such written adaptations of the folktale include Ama Ata Aidoo's play-text *Anowa* (1970) and Ezeigbo's "Agaracha Must Come Home" in her collection of short stories *The Buried Treasure* (1992). In Aidoo's *Anowa* (1970), Anowa marries Kofi Ako against her parents' choice for her. The marriage is an unhappy one and eventually, Anowa dies. Egoro, the heroine in Ezeigbo's "Agaracha Must Come Home" also marries Adamu in defiance of her family's wishes. The marriage becomes a nightmare for Egoro when Adamu is revealed to be deceptive and abusive. Although her second marriage to Anjov is happy, Egoro's first defiance makes her family and her town to banish her and she becomes an outcast.

To some extent Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* (1973) can also be taken as a written adaptation of the popular folktale that aims to prevent a girl from choosing her husband. Initially, Ogwoma, the heroine of the play-text, agrees to marry her parents' choice of a man she does not love. But when the man dies after the marriage, Ogwoma rebels against tradition in two ways – by rejecting marriage to her dead husband's brother and by having intimate relations with the man



she had always wanted to marry. Ogwoma and her lover die tragically. Thus, the tactics that Okoh's heroine employs to circumvent tradition can be contrasted with those of Ogwoma. Rather than confrontation which could lead to tragedy, Edewede settles for constructive and progressive negotiation.

The second instance where Edewede challenges culture is when she insists that her second daughter, Oseme, will not be circumcised. Okoh debunks the myth of the voicelessness of African women by showing that as wives, African women possess the power to speak out. Of all the powers inherent in all the roles which a woman assumes in the African culture, the role of wife has the weakest power. Ebikere accuses Edewede thus:

*You have always been headstrong. Too stubborn! Humility means nothing to you. A well brought up woman should know her place and respect her limits. But you, oh no! You want to be in every place, have a word on every issue. You don't even know that you are only a wife in this house. And as such, your place is in the kitchen. (p. 7)*

It must be noted that Ebikere is also a wife in that house but age has bestowed on her a higher status than Edewede's. Edewede, however, rejects the position of weakness which Ebikere wants to push her into. She tells Ebikere that:

*I have played that role for years. Then I was too afraid to say or do anything... One day I realized that I was merely an object, used by others. Then I said to myself "Edewede! You are a human being You must kill that fear in you. Kill it". Mother-in law, I have killed that fear implanted in me from childhood. Now I take my destiny in my hands. I speak on issues that concern me. (p. 7)*



The fear of losing her only remaining child is responsible for this change. Edewede, with the help of Eriala, begins to mobilise the other women to resist female circumcision. It is instructive that the reason given for her repudiation by the males in the community is simply because she, as a human being, attempts to change the culture of her people. That she, a woman, is doing this is not the bone of contention as nowhere in the text is this stated or implied. Not even in the dialogue between the male elders (pp. 49-64) is there a hint that Edewede is being opposed because she is a woman. Rather what leads to the resistance against her is the urge to protect an age-long practice. Let us consider this:

**SECOND ELDER:** You mean we should destroy our tradition?

**FOURTH ELDER:** Indeed an ancient tradition. But its validity today is worth looking into.

**SECOND ELDER:** It served our forefathers some purpose and we are their offspring. So the same goes for us.

**FIRST ELDER:** We are not talking about what was, but what is. Right now, we have found ourselves in a difficult situation. We must choose a line of action, for the sake of progress. (p.61)

The other women also use their sexual power to bend the men to their wish for the abolition of female circumcision. They decide to suspend sexual relationship with their husbands. Ebun exclaims: "Our bottom. Yes, our bottom is our power. As from this day lock it up until they crawl to us for reconciliation. Is that clear?" (p. 45). This lock-up means that the women are in possession of their bodies and they are also powerful. Thus, in spite of Edewede and her age-group (as younger wives) being subordinated to Ebikere and her age-group of grandmothers, Okoh shows that there are still avenues which Edewede and others like her can explore to challenge oppressive structures and systems.



After taking the oath of solidarity "to prevent the weaker ones from falling by the wayside" (p. 45), they decide to leave Otoedo for Erial's Maternity Home. This is to prevent them (the women) from falling "under the heat of desire" (p. 47). This attests to the fact that the desire for the sexual act is as natural to men as it is to women. The women take this decision in retaliation of the public repudiation of Edewede which they consider as public humiliation. More importantly, this was done in the market, a public arena that falls under the influence of women. One of them declares: "He who curses the whole market does not exclude his mother" (p. 43). Edewede's repudiation is taken as an insult on all women of child-bearing age in the land. This is because the older women (led by Ebikere) who have passed the child bearing age are the ones who instigate the men in the act of banishing Edewede. The women's withdrawal from sex with the men along with the fact that the men are forced to take on housewife duties such as child care, compels the men to demand for a ban on female circumcision in Otoedo.

The women's decision to leave Otoedo in protest against the action of the village compares with a similar decision taken by the women in Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* (1991). It is significant to note that Clark's play is located in the same cultural and ethnic environment as Okoh's *Edewede*. While in *The Wives' Revolt* the women agitate for the right to own and keep property and protest against the inequitable distribution of the money given to the community by the oil company operating in the Erhuwaren community, the women in Clark's play also suspend sexual relations with their husbands by emigrating to Iyara. With the emigration of the women, chaos replaces peace as the men cannot effectively perform the roles of the women.

Clark thus reveals the important role of women in the community. What this demonstrates is that in the cultures in which the two plays are set are inherent sexual as well as cultural powers that can be, and has been, exploited by women to attain some goals



perceived to be of good not only to the women but also to their communities. In Okoh's play-text under study here, it is worthy of note that it is only when the women take the oath and leave the village that the ghosts of the girls who died from complications from circumcision begin to trouble the land and cause fear and confusion in the village as the separate worlds of the dead and the living are brought together. This is more so as the activity (i.e. sexual intercourse) that links the world of the unborn with that of the living has been suspended. Seer's parable and Ordia's dream where he notices that the crowd is made up, strangely, of only men underscore the grave consequences of the absence of women in the village. Seer refers to the women as "pearls of the sea" cast before swine and, in advising that the women be returned to the village, cautions thus: "wisdom is the chief path to happiness/ But rashness pays a price/ Of great magnitude/ And teaches wisdom in old age" (pp. 56-57). The women themselves stress the fact that their decision has nothing to do with their desire to be like men. Iriata reports that the women tell him that: "We are women. We love being women, wives and mothers. But each woman wants to be herself, think for herself, and express herself in her own way as a unique being" (p. 59). Edewede is at pains to assure her husband that her insistence that circumcision be stopped is not a personal war between the two of them as husband and wife (pp. 24-25, 41). In addition, Okoh portrays Edewede as a respectful wife who cares for her husband (p.23).

The story of Erialala (Mama-Nurse) is yet another instance of avenues in the culture which women take advantage of in the quest to overcome the challenges in their path. Edewede tells of how Erialala meets her husband who is from another ethnic group far away from theirs. Erialala is forced to follow her husband to his place of origin on his retirement from service as District Officer. However, life is not pleasant for Erialala in her husband's village as his other wives would not let her be. Erialala returns to her own home village where her husband goes to visit her. Although Ebikere scoffs at this arrangement, alleging that "part-time marriage" (p. 9) is no marriage,



Edewede insists that Eriala gets her husband's full attention whenever he visits and that she (Eriala) has seven children to that bargain. Edewede adds: "In this village, there are many women living in the same compound with their husbands; yet for months and months, they do not see their husband's loin cloth (p. 9). She thus serves as a model to other characters in similar circumstances including the fact of marrying a man who is from a separate land/community from hers.

Eriala is also significant because of the choice she decides to make by deliberately educating the women on health issues in general and thus being the inspiration behind the protest against female circumcision in Otoedo. In addition she bravely provides a haven for the protesting women. However, her significance as far as this topic is concerned ends here. Answers to questions concerning which age-group she belongs to and how her marriage was contracted are not provided in the literary work and so cannot be explored for the purpose of this paper.

### Conclusion

In deconstructing the myth of voicelessness of African women created by Western feminists, Okoh in *Edewede* demonstrates that within African culture are opportunities which women use to resist perceived and real forms of oppression. That some women choose not to make use of such options is neither an indication that they do not exist nor a proof that African women are being silenced. African women therefore can fight their battles themselves. However, this does not also imply that Okoh perceives of Western feminism from a completely negative perspective. As far as the playwright is concerned, one positive way of looking at Western and African feminisms is to focus on the common denominator between them, namely "their struggle against sexism... which means every kind of discrimination against women because of their sex" (Aliyu-Ibrahim, personal communication, September 30, 2011).



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