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Historical Drama and Feminism at the Crossroads of Postcolonial Dialogue: A Reading of Irene Salami's *Idia: The Warrior Queen of Benin*

Adebisi Ademakinwa & Olusola Smith Adeyemi

Abstract

*This paper, through the prisms of postcolonial theory and feminism, interrogates history as a way of subverting and re-presenting issues that have been subjected to exclusion and oppression. Postcolonialism as a counter discourse is used to create a yardstick by which many discriminative and exploitative practices, regardless of time and space, are confronted. Among the tools of the exploitative practices are history and patriarchy. Writers (dramatists) are assessed in their exploration of history to make certain statements that bear directly on our contemporary society. To achieve this goal, Irene Agunloye-Salami's *Idia: The Warrior Queen of Benin* is used as case study. This paper, through the plumb line of postcolonial theory and feminism, interrogates history as a way of subverting and re-presenting issues that have been subjected to exclusion and oppression. It further reveals that contemporary African women dramatists engage in re-writing history as a signpost for gender representation and the creation of lofty roles for African women that history refused to acknowledge. The importance of this paper lies in its use of drama to contribute further to the assessment and interrogation of feminist discourse in contemporary Nigeria.*

Introduction: Interrogating Postcoloniality

Postcolonial theory remains an open field of discursive practices. In interrogating postcoloniality as a concept, two particular questions are often asked. Mukherhee, (2009:94) raises these questions:

Actors – Ramsey Noah, Rita Dominic, Monalisa Chinda, Stephanie Okereke, Ini Edo, Van Vicker, Uche Jumbo, Desmond Elliot

Language – English

Distributor/Marketer – Royal Arts Academy.

Female Voice In Scottish Drama: An Exploration of Sue Glover's *Bondagers*

Oludolapo Ojediran

Abstract

*This paper engages with women's ability to either speak out against, or condone the unpleasantness of the unjust socio-cultural and historico-political issues associated with the patriarchal society that does not allow women to act on their own volition. Such situations either make or mar women's future, as those who speak out against are seen as rebels and those who obey are defined by their limitations. Through the textual analysis of the Scottish writer, Sue Glover's work, *Bondagers* (1995), the three concepts of Alice Walker's (1984) womanist theory – audaciousness, woman-centeredness and community-centeredness – are referred to in the paper which shows that women's discourse agrees that most women need some level of persuasion in order to attain an audible level in the male-dominated societies. Therefore, it becomes noticeable that these three concepts in Glover's selected play re-address female identity, women's position in the society, gender relationships, sexual autonomy and self-expression.*

Introduction

Sue Glover occupies a significant position in the Scottish literary traditions; as she sits between two generations of Scottish female playwriting. She writes about characters who subvert societal view of women's inferior intellectual capabilities through the use of language to effect changes in their various relations within society, or with individuals. This is expressed through the themes of powerlessness and progress. Her use of characterisation to examine women's social existence in relation to the economic, political and sexual exploitation in a society, reveals the gendered situation of women. Horvat (1999:27) observes that:

Glover employs themes and language to investigate her character's perception of female identity, their position in society, interactions with other characters (both male and female), their sexuality and possibility of self-expression through means other than motherhood.

Through language use, Glover's plays challenge the readers to scrutinise the assumptions about gender and power as well as the language in question. Her plays see the barrier of language as a powerful tool and significant indicator of femininity in the society which legalises female expectations or stereotypes. The idea that women are more conservative, naturally cautious and reserved is re-addressed in Glover's writing. However, Horvat (1999) observes about Glover's plays that she does not only explore motherhood and its influence on femininity, but also exposes the situation of female to female oppressive perception in upholding patriarchal culture. Glover sees that it is not only patriarchy as an ideological or political system that devoices women within the society, but also the older generation of women who view modern changes to femalehood as an alien culture that should not be encouraged or accepted. These older generations of women are viewed as traditionalists whose belief in the cultural norms that make them adamant, ignorant and unchanging has been an integral part of the socio-cultural development. Such is noticed in Julie Okoh's *Edewede*, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods*. This is explained in Walker (1984) as the elder women's in the community who try to caution the younger females from being audacious and wanting to know more than what is required of them. In Walker's (2000:xi-xii) definitions, she explains womanism as:

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. . .

The female characters in the analysed play are presented as sexually less important, except for their reproductive capability. They are seen as examples of women who show realistic portraits of women in active search for a voice. Emenyi (2005: 42) observes that 'women are conceived as wives and mothers and stigmatised as prostitutes or courtesans because sexuality is the primary index for measuring their worth'. This reveals patriarchy as an essential part of the culture irrespective of class, race, ethnicity and religion. For example, in Glover's *Bondagers*, the only punishment given to Kello for violating Tottie is being 'douked (. . .) in the trough, and kicked (. . .) round the yard, he does not lose his job because he is good with horses and he is an hero with horses' (35-36). This shows the extent to which the female gender is treated with disdain in the patriarchal society. While this raises the question of the negative treatment of female gender and the psychological impact of such on them, it also reaffirms female exploitation as sustained by tradition and the society. Glover presents Tottie as the innocent soul who is blamed for being raped by both women and men who regard her as a girl without any value; however, Glover exposes the inability of many women to see their gendered positions.

The rape is being represented as a crime against Kello instead of Tottie who has been sexually, emotionally and socially abused, which reveals the role of sexism within the society, and this corresponds with Greer's (2000:135) view that a woman's body is a battlefield where she fights for liberation. It is through her body that oppression works, reifying her, sexualising her,

victimising her, disabling her. This shows the woman's body as a medium through which she is brought under continuous socio-cultural control. Ellen divulges the general opinion about Tottie's unfeminine and unaccepted behaviour:

Ellen: you know what they say? 'Well, no wonder,' they say. 'No wonder what happened, just look at the way she behaves, poor Kello, poor man, it wasn't his fault, he'd had a few, mind, why not, at the Kirn, and what was she doing there out in the field – asking for it.' That's what they say (50-51).

Ellen's words echo Jhally and Katz's (2001) and Messner's (2001) about rape being promoted by cultural ideas that link masculinity with aggression, strength, control and domination which are in contrast to women's subjugation and abuse. Ellen's words also expose women as being relatively incapable of controlling their emotions, sexual desires and vulnerability, and also show them as victims who suffer greatly from rejection by the community. Glover does not only explore female sexual exploitation through the act of rape and abuse in *Bondagers*, she also reveals more on economic exploitation which incorporates other types of exploitation such as physical, psychological, emotional and social exploitations of women in the male-dominated society. This is observed by Scullion (2006:103) that Glover confronts difficult issues of class, land, ownership, and belonging, and parallels the agricultural exploitation of the land with the economic and, in one brutal rape, the sexual exploitation of women. This also corresponds with Odi's (2014: 636-7) observation that

female struggle reverberates around the private and public spheres of human endeavours. . . while, for ages, female portraiture in dramatic works was, to say the least, lacklustre. With the momentum gained by the

feminist movement, portrayal of women in contemporary society is receiving massive reconstructions that see contemporary female characters crafted in bold, confident and assertive moulds.

While Glover is one of the leading female dramatists in Scotland, she is also one of the female writers who try to readdress femininity in their positive overhauling of the female image which has long been dented and trapped. Through her dramaturgy and ideological stance, Glover deals with historical, social, cultural, economic, political and religious views that limit the female gender in order to create alternative realities.

Female characterisation in *Bondagers*

As Glover presents the readers with the stories of six farm women working on the great Borders farms of Scotland in the 1860s, she also succeeds in analysing some of the perspectives used to measure femininity in a patriarchal society. To corroborate this, Head (1977:92) views that 'tradition has entrenched male power by relegating to men a superior position in the tribe, while women [are] regarded in a congenital sense as being an inferior form of human life.' While Head talks about how history and literature have relegated women to the background, it is evidenced that there is a compressed description of gender situation everywhere. However, these bondagers are women hired at the annual hiring fairs by various farm hands who require female workers to work with them when they themselves are being hired on the condition of their own employment by landowners. The play describes women as economic bondagers who are denied autonomy, culturally subverted and socially suppressed.

The issue of economic instability through Glover's depiction of these six women whose daily and yearly lives depend on how best they are able to work on the farm, and if the farm owners still require them as farm hands the following year, shows a form of exploitation. This is because if they are not needed by the farm owners anymore, they leave in search of other farms. These

women have a tenuous, uncertain, and lonely existence during their stay on the farm where they form bonds with the land and seek each other's companionship. Although these women have a source of income, their lives revolve around the male owners who determine their capabilities. Glover uses Ellen's description of the bondager's life to summarise the societal view of the female gender as property and a representation of land. Ellen recounts this in Act One, Scene Ten about her maister (Master) and her husband that:

Ellen: Don't be ridiculous, Ellen,' says the maister. 'We can't do away with the bondage. I can't employ a man who hasn't a woman to work with him. One pair of horse to every fifty acre, one hind for every pair of horse, one bondager for every hind. That's the way it's done,' he says. 'I'm all for progress,' he says, 'but I won't do away with the bondage,' he says. 'We need the women. Who else would do the work? . . . Women's work, for women's pay.' (28-29)

Apart from analysing the exploitation of the female labour force in the mid-nineteenth century agricultural system in the Lowlands, *Bondagers* explores the importance of women re-analysing their situations and recognising their powers and the limitations attached to such powers. Ellen's opinion of Maister's description of the bondagers reveals another facet of women's situation and treatment in Glover's play, which talks about their importance to the society. It is a historical fact that within the plantation farms, women are more exploited than men. No wonder Alexander (1995:10) affirms about the black women that

Some slave owners treated black women as animals who were expected to breed as rapidly as possible and produce new 'foals' each year. Under law . . . regardless

of who the father might be, those women's offspring always 'belonged' to the master, never to the parents.

While Alexander talks about black American women during slavery, women issue all over the world still poses a challenge to writers, law makers, and even the male gender who tends to be the main exploiter through patriarchal culture. Women are seen as multi-taskers who try to perfect their own domestic works, and also serve as the beautifying elements for the men to earn their social status; but Glover sees the bondage position as a form of silence to them as they are only regarded in line with the work they do. These bondagers see themselves to be in an indentured situation whereby they need their freedom, they yearn for a circumstance where they will not be owned by male 'hind' anymore but be hired directly by the farm owners and given equal pay and opportunities. They are presented as women workers struggling with their roles as workers, mothers, mentors, and lovers:

Sara: (*quite cheerful*) Tinklers, that's what we are!

Tottie: Penny Pies. We are not penny pies.

Maggie: A six-pound rise would do me fine, and a new house even finer – but what we really need is an end to the bondage . . . Lots of folk are beginning to speak out against the bondage (26).

Maggie's words surprise the other women who do not seem convinced with her course to stop this form of female oppression. As mentioned earlier about Alexander's (1995) view, Horvat (1999:70) also compares the bondage system to slavery which allows one to find similarities between the hiring fair and the slave fairs in America. Horvat's comparison of the hiring to slavery exposes the treatment of women as acquisitions who must remain silent as long as they are owned by men. This is almost the situation which the bondagers find themselves, whereby they have

to earn the money equivalent to the rent of the cottage in which they stay. They do the same work as the men, but earn lesser than these men. Maggie reiterates Butler's (1999:58) observation in analysing Lacanian theory of language that:

Women are said to "be" the phallus in the sense that they maintain the power to reflect or represent the "reality" of self-grounding postures of the masculine subject, a power which, if withdrawn, would break up the foundational illusions of the masculine subject position.

Glover avoids limiting her female characters to the domestic sphere, to be subjugated; rather, they engage in the search for freedom which is an unacceptable behaviour from women in the society, and those that dare to speak against such oppressions are crushed within the male-dominated system. This, however, makes the women inaudible in the hunter's territory which Glover also describes in the character of Alec in *The Seal Wife*, who wishes to overpower Rona's 'unacceptable' behaviour. Ironically, through the cultural feminine qualities (beauty, sexiness, powerlessness and passivity) and characterisation of these female characters, the playwright's use of language serves as a form of empowerment. This enables them to confront certain feminine cultural limitations and to question the masculine authority, thereby challenging the socio-cultural values.

This is also analysed in the playwright's characterisation of the fourteen year old Tottie, whose realisation that she has an inner ability to write within herself depicts a conscious effort to express her audibility even though no one listens to her own part of the story that leads to Kello's death. Tottie is seen as a 'daftie' raped by the ploughman, Kello, who has caught the eye and heart of many young bondagers because of his looks, charms and love of dancing.

Glover also examines the character of Liza as being one of the unwilling females who is not ready to fall victim of patriarchy due to marriage and motherhood. Liza's patriarchal rejection mirrors an aspect of Walker's analysis of womanish nature that helps to re-evaluate the social view of motherhood in relation to marriage. Liza sees motherhood and marital obligations as forms of confinement, which make her reject both ideas in her discussion with Maggie; she views them as an avenue to bond her again while being used as farm hand. She loves a life of freedom, to stay in Canada with what she has heard:

Liza: (coming in over Sara's words) I'm not getting wed. not yet. Not for years. The sooner you wed, the more bairns you get.

Maggie: That's what you wed for – bairns!

Liza: Why?

Maggie: Why? Why?! . . . Why, they keep the roof over you when they're older, that's why. They keep things going. Wull and Tam will soon be half-yins, getting half pay, and when they're grown there'll be Jim and Drew, and the girls will make bondagers in time. Meg can work with her daddy. Netta can work with Wull or Tam. It'll be grand. We'll take our pick at the Hiring. Ay, we'll be easy then. Soon enough. (31-32)

Maggie's perception of marriage and children unmasks the societal attitude towards how a woman is perceived in relation to her male and female children. Although Glover characterises Maggie to assume an assertive position with a commanding manner of speech in the way she reprimands Liza's view of the difficult life of a bondager, she is also seen as an upholder of tradition in her analysis of marriage and motherhood. Maggie's view that the grown-up male children would become hind while the female ones will become bondagers and will give them better chances of being selected fast at the hiring fair, reveals the societal bounds of what the feminine and the masculine gender should be.

Maggie's view at this point mirrors Theodora Ezeigbo as cited in Emenyi (2005:42) that the problems which follow the female as an inferior human being are rooted on the insistence by the society that 'a woman's body makes the woman' (8). On the one hand, these bondagers want their freedom, but the fear of being jobless makes them see motherhood as an opportunity to be re-selected by the farm owners. Thus, men use their privileged position in the society to exploit women by subsuming their selfhood in male-designed modes of existence. However, this reveals that the institutionalisation of male dominance signifies that the female gender is expected to remain subjective and maintain her marginal position within the society. This shows that the economic tradition has limited women to being subservient and restricted to the codes and ethics of men.

Language Use in *Bondagers*

Spender (1980) points out that language could be used as a form of socio-cultural silencing and at the same time be used as an avenue through which women can speak out against their limitations. Spender (1980:97) sees that,

people who have the power to use language advantageously have the potential to order the world to suit their own ends, the potential to construct a language, a reality, a body of knowledge in which they are central figures, the potential to legitimate their own primacy, and to create a system of beliefs which is beyond challenge...

This seems to apply to women writers who have the ability to redress their situation through the use of language in the characterisation they give to their individual female characters. While such writings are not only to correct the low self-esteem caused by discrimination and oppression in society; it also has a

potential to erase the negative identity that the female gender has been associated with, traditionally. Glover uses her female characters' language to problematize women's position within society as it reveals how the patriarchal system silences women through the words they use, which regards the female gender as people, who should not be heard. For example, in *Bondagers*, Glover depicts this by Maister's refusal to listen to Tottie's side of the story, how the hatred begins and what leads to Kello's death; instead he dismisses Maggie who tries to explain. Tottie's trance-like narration of how Kello dies in the last scene, Act Two, Scene Ten, reflects how women are denied most of their part in history. Tottie's part of the story draws attention of the readers to the actual truth; although she is denied her own part of the story to the Maister and has to live with the consequence of Kello's death which happens as an accident and not the assumed murder.

Although this suggests that when women are seen (outspoken) in the society, they are seen through the extreme act of rebellion, violence and attempts to actively speak out against different forms of oppression. Considering womanism as a theory that sees women as survivors in an oppressive system of multiple platforms, Tottie's recollection shows her as a female who negotiates through her form of oppression to reveal the capability and worth other characters think she does not possess. Tottie's narration therefore allows readers to see how one's language expresses one's participation as speakers in the speech community, the roles we perform as speakers to publicise our feelings, attitudes, judgment and our part of the story. Just as Showalter (1977:348) asserts that "women's writing is 'double voiced discourse' that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant."

Furthermore, apart from using linguistic binary systems (Scottish and English languages) to characterise her females as powerful and powerless individuals, the playwright uses binary characterisation of placing two opposite female characters beside each other to symbolise their view of female silence and audibility

in a way to create the balance as portrayed in the plays. Such action helps readers to understand the social status and stance of each female character distinctively, which allows a critical analysis of their personalities as being pro or against the patriarchal culture.

Although the female characters face the 'other' situation as women and in relation to community centeredness, Walker's womanist theory describes woman's otherness as a means which allows both self-empowerment and affiliation. In terms of male commitment to societal acceptance of women, the opposite is what Glover's Ellen describes her husband to be:

Ellen . . . 'Please God: Keep them dry for the flitting.' . . . He's a fair man, the maister. He's have built a new row of houses by now – if it wasn't for the Marquis raising the rent. 'I overlook small faults in good workman,' says the maister. 'I've lived here all my life,' he says. 'I know this place like I know my hand. I know the Border Peasant: honest, industrious, godfearing . . . He never knew me, never knew my name even, till I set my cap at him. The first year of marriage, I still had the face of a bondager: white below, where the kerchief had been tied, the top of my cheeks and my nose dirt brown. The ladies stared, and smiled behind their fans. But I'm all pale now, I'm a proper lady now. Not once has he asked me what it was like: to live in the row, to work in the field. Not once . . . they've made a lady of me now (47).

Ellen's observation of maister's view of women on the surface shows him as a man who wishes to incorporate her into the public decoration, but the above speech reveals that she is a bondager of another kind now; 'they've made a lady of me now' refers to her husband's moulding her into a doll of his liking which reiterates the earlier discussion of how a woman is used for a

man's societal glory. To some extent on the one hand, this is noticed in Ellen's freedom to first loosen her corset as soon as she joins other women in their cottage, and in her constant regret of being unable to conceive as a means of performing her wifely and womanly duties. On the other hand, it reveals Ellen as a bondager of another kind, whereby the husband has moulded her into a frame of his liking which is noticed in her fearful expression about her inability to conceive. As a bondager in another category, she is a bit powerful, able to use her voice to some extent, to get away from the life of bondage, and to mingle with people of the higher class who are assertive and expressive.

Conclusion

As a woman writing about women, Glover raises an alarm of female exploitation which has happened in the past and is still happening at present through some other avenues. Glover displays women as victims of bodily exploitation, deception, and persecution, in the analysed plays which allow some of these female characters to feel anger, disgust and self-pity that are expressed in their language use. Although they speak in the play, the weaker female characters' speeches depict their silence, their abandonment and their violation. For example, Tottie's traumatised in *Bondagers* after Kello defiles her, makes her think she will automatically become the suitable wife for him, but Kello only uses her as a means of satisfying his sexual pleasure. On the other hand, the stronger female characters display some levels of maturity, vocality, power and determination. However, this play explains, to some extent, Walker's definition of audaciousness, woman's centredness and community-centredness amongst these women who are in dire need of autonomy.

Glover also explores motherhood as a means through which women are recognised and esteemed. Feminist writers also use the patriarchal structure in their plays to transform their timid, shy, immature women into fully grown, mentally developed and sexually intelligent women who are confident enough to question

the authority of men. Despite the niche created for these women in the plays, they are still limited in their autonomy and choice which has to be approved by the men before the women can forge ahead. This mirrors Sen's (2010) position that women all over the world experience male violence as they talk about the devastating impacts of the belittling, of physical injuries and emotional destruction, of fearing for the safety of their children, of shame and embarrassment of speaking to anyone about their experiences, and the fear that violence brings with it. This hinders the bondagers as they experience the psychological and emotional torture that creates dented identity for them which is evidenced in the analysed play where the men are physically absent on stage or in the dramatisation, but their lives revolve around these men. However, this reveals another form of female dependence on the male characters, which is seen as subjugation and lack of power in female expression.

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