

Womanist Aesthetics of Assertiveness in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods*.

By

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Abstract

Assertiveness is an affirmative mode of communication which is often linked with self-esteem. Although one needs to be mindful of cultural variations in what is considered as assertive. Consequently, this paper discusses how late Zulu Sofola uses the aesthetic of assertiveness to reconstruct the social reception of the female gender. The analysis of the female characters in Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods* (1973) shows that aesthetics should not only see women in relation to beauty, but through the presentation of dynamic experiences in language which is portrayed in the female characterisation. With reference to Alice Walker's (1984) theoretical framework of womanist view through the textual analysis, this paper engages womanist's aesthetics of assertiveness which makes women see them 'selves' as being valuable, important and essential and gives them a sense that they can make effective changes through assertiveness. Sofola presents such characters to see aesthetic in assertiveness as a sort of help, the formation of a strong self which allows them to explore the opportunities of disagreeing with certain socio-cultural, historical and religious beliefs that limit and destroy their capabilities. Interestingly, this paper shows how Sofola's use of dramatic language; thematic pre-occupation and determined female characters assert themselves despite the socio-cultural subjugation of the female gender through patriarchal culture in the African society.

Keywords: Womanist, Assertiveness, Aesthetics, Language.

Introduction

This paper explores the idea that women can change the way the society perceives them through the use of assertive language, thus creating

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the aesthetics of assertiveness. As this is observed in womanist aesthetics that does not only offer women the possibility to change the views and readings of the world around them; the researcher recognises another view that deals with women's assertiveness which gives women the opportunities of changing their own world. Osita (2012, p. 204) elaborates more on Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods* that:

Male roles become associated with higher values and importance, and are hence much more respected to the detriment of those of women thereby placing men in a dominant position that crushes the other (women) to a subservient one. The imbalance in the position of man and woman is more in patriarchal societies where culture accords much power to men and demands that human lineage be sustained through the male.

With reference to Osita's conclusion on the issue of gendered society above, the source of women's social oppression is interwoven in the African patriarchal traditional society whereby men are adorned with supremacy and women with subjectivity. However, the womanist aesthetics make women see them 'selves' as being valuable, important and essential. It gives them a sense that they can make effective changes through assertiveness. This makes most women reject marginalisation, subordination and under representation in their different societies where women are mostly seen, heard and recognised through a man. Women see aesthetics of assertiveness as a sort of help, the formation of a strong self which allows them to explore the opportunities of disagreeing with certain socio-cultural, historical and religious beliefs that limit and destroy their capabilities. Like Hegel's (1991) theory of self, Sofola's protagonist, Ogwoma, recognises herself, accept herself and see herself as being moral even if the male characters and the societies refuse to see her that way. This protagonist nullifies what Yacim (2012, p. 51) sees as a wide dichotomy between male and female sexes which can be said emerged from its traditions and cultures.

Apart from the aesthetic idea that sees women in relation to beauty, this paper engages in an analysis of aesthetics as a possible presentation of dynamic experiences in language. This shows that aesthetic idea is not only presenting a particular rational idea of reason that allows some of the female characters to strive for maximum representation through their language and actions; it does presents a variety of aesthetic

ideas that help create different view of femininity. With regards to Walker's (1984, pp. xi-xii) definition of womanism that it 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 nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture . . . and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually . . . committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist . . . Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender

Walker depicts the potential for the oppressed in the society to grow out of their situation. Her four-partite definition seems to suggest multiple uses of womanism. These multiple uses are very different, but all of them have a common denominator – they show a link with black women's past in relation to their gender and race. They also serve as visionary theory that seeks to help black women to enter feminist discourse. Walker's comparison of womanism and feminism may be seen as a way of fostering interracial association amongst women of different categories. Walker's definition explores three different avenues of femalehood, (1) women's personal expressiveness, (2) women's emotions and (3) women's empathy that comprises the ethic of caring.

All these are, however, passed across through language which seems to be the most recognised and distinguishing factor that differentiates Walker's womanist theory from other theories developed to encompass racism, classism and sexism. While analysing the selected play, it shows Sofola two views of treating women's issue. On the one hand, Sofola's intention is to explore the cultural superiority and validation of tradition in Africa, but also created an avenue to expose the effects of imposing an archaic conservative marginalisation on women. Thus, this paper shows Sofola as a writer who demands the freedom and opportunity to use her voice through her female characters to actively negotiate old and new culture.

Sofola creates characters and storyline that are representational; appealing to readers' physicality and emotion. Reading most of Sofola's plays such as *Song of a Maiden*, *Wizard of Law*, *Ivory Tower*, *King Emene*

amongst others, one view the nature of aesthetic attitude nonetheless that remains comprehensive. This elusiveness allows certain attitudes that readers need to adopt with art such as openness, sensitivity, and willingness to enter imaginative experience which comes from people as readers rather than the art or artist involved.

Aesthetics in Womanist Context

The aesthetic of assertiveness discusses women's boldness, the repercussions and the breaking of taboos that have limited women's ability to see beyond the limitations of society. While the selected play analyses the beauty of being a woman, the value of woman in terms of bride price, it shows the contradictions of motherhood, mother/child relationships, and women's firmness on choice despite the discrimination against her gender in a culturally patriarchal society, in relation to Immanuel Kant's view of aesthetics as equalling goodness with morality. Kant's view is questioned as Sofola creates female character who do not fall into the approved categories of what is considered moral and good.

Unlike the female aesthetics of the 1970s that calls for the return of mother tongue and a genderless of women's speech in their writings, Sofola sees her use of different languages as a search for cultural superiority and gender dichotomy, which can be used to eliminate women's stereotypes and belittlement that tend to be a crucial part of their cultural identity. Sofola sees a woman as a whole being and not a fragmented part in her portrayal of different Ogwoma who is able to confront her situation at the end of the play. As Black and Coward (1998, p. 41) observe that females are often regarded in sexual categories such as whore, slag, mother, virgin, sister, daughter, housewife, amongst others; Ogwoma shows that women can be active, independent and relevant despite her subordination. Such aesthetics of assertiveness makes women courageous, sincere and allows them self-fulfilment without anybody infringing on their personal rights. However, womanist aesthetics of assertiveness is to help women feel represented in dominant discourses to create a self-defined voice for themselves in order to discuss their own meaning of womanhood.

In Kant's view, engaging in a moral behaviour is the highest expression of freedom which disregards any form of external influence. His analysis of the common sense of duty is discussion motif of his work, which he believes is part of the necessity to act morally. For Kant,

morality is linked with aesthetics, which serves as a preparatory instruction to morality. Guyer (2000) analyses Kant's view of beauty that gives sensible form to moral ideas which is related to the view that there is an analogy between the experience of beauty and moral feelings. While Kant's account of beauty has been criticised on the ground of its universal application, the rejection of his impersonality of moral judgements in ethical theories evolved from contemporary ethicists such as Ancombe (1958), Foot (1994), and Nafsika (2000). These critics emphasise that the achievement of a meaningful life is one of the main goals of female discourse on the one end, and aesthetics difference on the other. Kantian aesthetics and moral ideas are evident in the selected plays whereby the female writers use their works to address and expose issues affecting women in their different continents in line with aesthetic differences and female identities. For example in Aidoo's *Anowa*, Anowa's character is the opposite of Kant's view of aesthetics, but Anowa's character is used as a means of exposing the treatment of a womanish female as observed in Walker's womanist theory. However, Kant summarises that everyone has his own sense of taste which often goes beyond being agreeable or sensory discrimination.

Language Aesthetics in Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*.

In discussing the aesthetics of female language, assertiveness is a key word. The present writer employs assertiveness in relation to Walker's theory to re-analyse the concerns of women who are neither trivial nor petty as the society sees them. The playwright is overtly vocal in creating female characters that are capable of instigating a process of social and cultural change through their actions. Taking into consideration Irigaray's (1995, p. 86) observation in an interview which Couze Venn interpreted in *Women's Exile*, the first step in the movements of women liberation is to enable every woman to become conscious that what she has felt in her own experience is a condition felt by all women which makes it possible for that experience to become politicised. Politicising women's experience is not the type of politics instituted by men, but the politics that involves women's issues with regards to their own contrasting tales. This exposes that the marginalisation, subordination, limitation, misrepresentation and under representation of women is not particular to one continent alone, rather, it is a global phenomenon that can mainly be addressed by women who are ready to rewrite their own story and not history.

Such experiences point at the exploitation women encounter from childhood till adulthood which affects their bodies and psychology as well. The issue of social exploitation leads to psychological exploitation of the females in a system where the social mode of existence itself in general exploits women. In other words, such a patriarchal system allows social silence and subjectivity as part of what constitute the female identity.

Hence, Sofola explores beyond beauty and ugliness as pre-eminent aesthetic notions whereby morality and aesthetics are interwoven which allows her main female character, Ogwoma to possess audacious abilities. The playwright portrays Ogwoma to often have the intuitive sense to see what comprises women's devaluation such as personal experiences, depreciation of worth which accumulates into an overwhelming sense of sadness and pain, gendered power dynamics and gendered responsibilities. Some of the modes of devaluation that can be found in this play include trampled autonomy, emotional and verbal abuse, molestation, and murder exposed through language which happens to women regardless of class, age, race and sexual orientation. Exploring the aesthetical view involved in female assertiveness, Sofola's works identify the feelings, concepts and judgements of the female gender arising from social perceptions which allows the female characters' language under analysis to be considered emotive, beautiful and sublime without necessarily being considered as socially moral.

This is seen in Sofola's portrayal of the female characters such as Ogwoma in *Wedlock*, Yetunde in *Song of a Maiden*, who are often aware of the cultural disregard for women that affect their self-esteem and self-confidence. As these characters engage in different level of communication with parents, peers, and others in the plays, it exposes their negative treatments and their vulnerable situations. These situations make them subordinate and trapped in the society that sees them as the 'second sex' where they are expected to serve in total submission and self-

for another blink of the eye this time –do you hear?
(p. 9)

Looking beyond the tragic elements in the play, the play explores women's hopes, desires, dreams, anticipations, doubts, hopelessness and expectations. Ogwoma's powerless situation at the very beginning of the play review the feelings of women's personal freedom and their interconnectedness within the society whereby women's freedom is associated with the socio-cultural beliefs. Sofola explores this by making her to marry a man who is not her choice, but since her bride price is needed to treat a dying brother, she is left with no choice than to accept the decision. She is bound to obey her parents' decision which remains final unless there is a higher bidder and since there is none, she is forced to marry the man of her parents' choice. This is a situation that makes the female gender handicapped in the society and family that should protect them, rather the treatment they experience make them suffer in silence. While the men in most societies, they tend to grow up to be selfish; the women languish in pain and anger with the hope of having some changes in the tradition that will give them personal autonomy over self and body. Like any other women in the patriarchal society, a woman is treated inferior due to cultural and traditional constraints that allow her to romanticise the norms of femalehood.

This is experienced by Ogwoma whose worth is being traded for the health of her brother's early initiation into manhood as a means of healing him. Basow (1992, p. 129) notices that nearly everywhere in the world, most couples prefer male children to female children. This preference is often communicated to female children and it directly or indirectly affects the female psyche and the view they have of themselves. Walker believes that with womanish gall, these females can be encouraged to have psychic freedom without fear, self-hate and guilt, but with courage to be daring in the face of conformity and conspiracy while revealing their maltreatment.

Sofola's Womanist Values

In the womanist view, while Walker agitates for social wholesomeness, Sofola presents some social constructs that should be rejected and destroyed in order for females to operate assertively and autonomously. Such actions mirror Barry and Flitterman (1980) proposal that aesthetics should be designed to subvert the production of women as commodity. This is visible in the playwright's call for a review of

women's situation and new attributes that can make them human and not incapable female. Ogwoma refuses to see her mourning period as a period that will limit her desire once again; rather she sees it as a time she can challenge the tradition which has held her back for years. This action mirrors Oluwayomi (2012, p. 154) that the era of projecting African women as lifeless or insensitive objects is over. Ogwoma's refusal to wait for the mourning period to be over before engaging in the assumed adulterous act with her childhood lover Uloko, whom she is denied because of bride price, reveals her as a determined and audacious character. The conversation between Ogwoma and Anwasia reveals more about Ogwoma's love for Uloko:

OGWOMA: Oh God, Uloko has blinded me.

I go to the market,
It is Uloko i see in every stall;
I go to the farm,
It is Uloko in every tree;
The wind blows,
It is his hands that touch me;
The birds sing,
It is his voice i hear;
Oh God, his child moves in me.

ANWASIA: He has really captured you. It is true that when the sweetness of a man touches the heart of a woman, nothing else matters. Uloko has done it for you, but please act with good sense (p. 10)

Although, both lovers are aware such action is against their tradition, they are willing to face the consequence. Since they do not want to waste the time they consider as an opportunity after the death of her husband for fear she would be betrothed to her dead husband's relation she does not love. While her friend tries to caution her actions, she becomes more assertive in her choice of words damning all consequences, personalises her words to have a sense of autonomy, drawing a battle line between her and tradition and refusing to listen to any further persuasion that will make her wait till the end of her mourning period:

OGWOMA: No matter how you beat me, I will not listen to you this time (p. 19).

Traditionally, Ogwoma is to marry the deceased husband's brother, but because she is forced to marry him at first, she sees his death as an

opportunity to be free, to assert and express herself in the midst of a tradition that mistakes the worth of a woman with her bride price in Ogwoma's society. Such levirate union makes women more vulnerable because the widows most time are at the mercy of the other wife(ves). In some West African traditions even now, the worth of female bride-price allows parents to give away their daughters to the highest bidder who in most cases is against the girl's wish. Such an issue makes women become the possession of the man they marry which makes them unassertive and inexpressive because they have been sold to the husbands unknowingly by their parents. In the African context, the issue of bride-price only reaffirms that women are stereotypes of property in societies with such practice. This is further reiterated by Ogwoma's friend, Anwasia during their discussion who reminds her about the tradition that makes a girl the source of wealth to the family which Ogwoma rejects immediately:

OGWOMA: It is one who never loved who thinks that way. I pray for the past three years for my God to deliver me from this marriage. My prayers were answered and nothing can stop me this time. Let the moon turn into blood; let the rain become blood; Ogwoma loves and Ogwoma will do it again! (pp. 9-10).

Ogwoma's language shows her determined and assertive nature; she is not ready to compromise her life for the sake of culture anymore. However, Sofola's respect for culture is vivid in *Wedlock* which also mirrors Yacim (2012, p. 51) view that the society has set a wide dichotomy between male and female sexes which can be said emerged from its traditions and cultures. This shows that culture, tradition, language and gender are all interwoven. As Sofola reveals that language and gender differences are social construct which places men in central position, her readers cannot alienate her belief in tradition, but can view the language she uses as an avenue to draw attention to what she describes as 'cosmic consciousness' that allows socio-cultural beliefs to supersede the treatment of the women. Sofola ruptures the expectation underlying Walker's womanist theory in *Wedlock* as a sign of cultural allegiance to Africa's cultural traditions which shows that the play's womanist promise expires alongside Ogwoma's death as no other female character is ready to take on the fight after Ogwoma. Sofola's play exposes her disgust against the tradition of giving a girl in marriage because of bride-price and the tradition that allows a deceased husband's brother marry his wife as part of the custom:

ANWASIA: ... No matter how much a woman loves a man, the gods forbid what you have done. You seem to forget that you are still in mourning.

OGWOMA: I am not in mourning. Are you happy now?

ANWASIA: Listen to me, people don't do things that way. You were forced to marry Adigwu, we all know that, but this pregnancy is not a good thing (p. 9).

Sofola portrays Ogwoma to be relieved by the death of her husband. This is expressed in her discussion with Anwasia who can only empathise with her for being forced to marry a man who is not her choice. At the same time, Anwasia is not pleased with Ogwoma's actions because of her mother-in-law, Odibei whose evil behaviour in the society makes people get scared of her. Odibei is ready to know the cause of her son's death as she believes that such a death is unnatural and must be avenged. She accuses Ogwoma of infidelity even before the truth of her relationship with Uloko is revealed. Sofola emphasises Ogwoma's traits of beauty, assertiveness and self-determination which makes people question her femininity and sexuality. This is expressed by one of Ogwoma's uncle:

UDO: All of us have known Ogwoma from the very day she was born. We all know that she is very strong-willed. Many of us have often wondered why she did not become a man (p. 26).

Ogwoma might be presented as a strong-willed character, but she becomes entrapped within a culture that sees her behaviour as disobedient. Walker's theory sees women with Ogwoma's ability as women who strive to reach wholesomeness like her female character in the novel, *The Color Purple* (2004) where Celie her main character breaks away from the patriarchal system that hinders her ability, limits her, silences her and renders her incapable of seeing herself as being human with all the scarred memories from childhood. This makes her see the 'self' as an abused personality who is not needed in the society. Celie is abused by all the men she comes in contact with starting from her father to the husband she is betrothed to and even her step son until she meets another young woman, Shrug Avery who brings out the womanish nature within her. Walker does not make Celie regrets her action at the end of the novel like Sofola does to Ogwoma who pays the consequence of her disobedience with her life, instead Walker makes the men in her life regrets their actions

after Celie is seen as a changed and redefined character in every aspect of life who is able to take charge of her autonomy.

Rather than creating women as the muted group in her play, Sofola does not only present these female characters as symbols of social change, but as characters capable of active radical rethinking and action whose strong self, self-definition and self-assertion engages in the rough and tumble of everyday life, not without the fear, but with a resolute mindset. This is re-emphasised in Walker's theory that sees the availability of various options for women with different talents, gender orientations, views, commitments and cultural values which help to re-define them in diverse ways.

Conclusion

To any cultural woman, Ogwoma is seen as a fallen woman. Every woman in the village including her mother does not support her action. Only Anwasia whom she sees as her confidant believes that the relationship between marriage and patriarchy is that which hinders most women in the society. Language in Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* is based on the conflict between female quest to assertiveness and tradition. This makes her protagonist go against what tradition demands of her as a means of displaying Walker's view of female audaciousness. Although, the play is a tragedy, Ogwoma's quest creates the boldness and the wish to venture into what the society sees as dangerous to the female gender which allows her to place two opposite worlds against each other to create her own free world damning all consequences.

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