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## Directing gender equality in Ahmed Yerima's *Altine's Wrath*

**ABSTRACT.** One of the functions of the theatre director is to develop a concept that would appeal to the audience in the process of his interpretation. This paper textually evaluates the issue of gender equality as the directorial concept in Ahmed Yerima's *Altine's Wrath*. The paper adopts the sociological, literary and artistic methods to interrogate the directorial implications of the text as it will be demonstrated in the performance. The paper notes that a thorough understanding of gender theories and principles would guide a director's realization of the identified concept. The paper, therefore, calls on directors to support the issue of gender equality by developing concepts in this regard and as such promote a peaceful society.

**KEYWORDS:** directing, gender, equality, *Altine's Wrath*

### Introduction

Directing for stage, screen or audio/radio depends on the effective harmonization of the inputs of different collaborators aimed at protecting the developed concept in the script. The directorial concept of a performance is the metaphorical statement that drives the message to the audience. The essence of a performance is to identify or support in solving societal problems in order to better the society. In the manner the playwright would express his thought through a theme that may be intentional or a creative accident, the director consciously develops a concept that may support the thought of the playwright or refute it. In this era of revolution and change, theatre directors have consistently developed directorial concepts that will support the changes in the society. The play understudy as crafted by Yerima addresses the theme of gender discourse upon which the director has crafted his concept of gender equality.

Gender is a term used in describing the behaviour and character traits expected of an individual on the basis of biological peculiarities or differ-

ences. Scholars have observed that there are attributes or certain responsibilities attached to men or women on sexist basis which some radical scholars have deconstructed. In this way, some problem solving skills and subjects are arrogated to males, while others are said to be female-dominated and most recently the transgendered. In most African traditions, the girl-child, from birth, is restricted to the role expectations approved by the society relating to domestic and supporting roles while the man is given dominating roles and superior responsibilities. As a result of this cultural practice, girls are discouraged from developing their individual potentials in various ways and disciplines whereas men are encouraged to be strong as leaders of the future. However, through theatre experience which manifests by way of the ingenuity of the director, issues that are textually placed are exposed through directorial processes. The expressive nature of man through the theatre platform makes, Arnold Stephanie (2001, p. 2) to observe that:

Into theatre performances we pour our dreams, our myths and stories, our struggles and fears. The conflicts that divide us and the laughter that makes whole take their place on the stage. We make a journey through space and time that is limited only in our imagination.

Premised on the above, apart from the efforts of Nigerian playwrights, theatre directors have also consistently championed gender equality through their development of directorial concepts that support such thematic thrusts in plays. Such play directors as Ola Rotimi, Henry Bell-Gam, Emmanuel Emasealu, Ojo Bakare, Ayo Akinwale, Abdurashed Adeoye, Efiyng Johnson and Olympus Ejue among others are prominent in supporting the efforts of Nigerian playwrights through the graphic presentation of the fight against gender inequality.

This paper evaluates the directorial interpretation of gender equality as the intended meaning for the Nigerian audience with a view to redirecting the psyche of the Nigerian citizenry using Ahmed Yerima's *Altine's Wrath*.

### **On directing and directorial concept**

Directing involves the processes of interpreting a text or scenario through the application of composition, picturization, movement, rhythm

and pantomimic-dramatization. In directing, the director communicates to his audience through the use of visual and auditory elements. Robert Cohen (2003, p. 492) is of the view that: "directing is not simply a craft; it is *directing* in the dictionary as well as in the theatrical sense: it is to lead, to supervise, to instruct, to give shape. In other words, it is to do what is necessary to make things work."

From Cohen's definition, the term involves distinctive experiences such leading, supervision, instruction, shaping and making things work. The concept of directing therefore requires extraordinary skills for effective delivery of the intended thrust of the text or developed scenario. This may have prompted Harold Clurman's (1972) description of who the director is in terms of qualities. According to him:

The director must be an organizer, a teacher, a politician, a psychic detective, a lay analyst, a technician, a creative being. Ideally, he should know literature (drama), acting, and the history and above all, he must understand people. He must inspire confidence. All of which means, he must be a "great lover".

These essential qualities are further extended by Hugh Morrison (1973), when he notes that "the director must be intelligent, deductive, reflective, curious, and rational ... with passionate interest in plays and the creative processes that lead to performance" (p. 13). The interpretation of a text is determined by the director's understanding of the script after considering the cost of production, availability of cast, topicality, thematic implication and the audience factor. In developing the directorial concept, Emasealu (2010, p. 72) observes that:

The directorial art involves the ability to peruse a playwrights script thoroughly, discover the intended message for the audience and be able to communicate such a message to the actors and actresses who, ultimately constitute the conduit between the text and the audience [...] it is the task of the director to fashion the way of achieving expressive and communicative movements, gestures, appropriate verbal nuances, songs, dance, music, stage business (no matter how minute) and effective use of eloquence silences.

Similarly, Wilson and Goldfarb (2011, p. 61) note that the director must critically examine the script to understand dramatic purpose and subsequently ask the following question to achieve a believable interpretation of the conceived concept:

What is the playwright's intention: to entertain, educate or to arouse strong feelings in the audience, what is the playwright's point of view towards the characters and events of the play: does he them as tragic or comic? How has the playwright developed the action in the play: in other words how is the play constructed? Such considerations are crucial because the director is the one person who must have an overall grasp of the text, in order to guide the performance and making it come alive. If an actor or actress has any question about a character or the meaning of a scene, the director must be able to provide an answer.

These fundamental questions will definitely generate the hidden ideas that will guide the director in his interpretative effort. Irrespective of the intention of the director, the director must thoroughly understudy the play to achieve his mandate.

### **Briefs on feminist criticism**

The emergence of feminist movements across the world has influenced the position of women within the public spheres. Similarly, scholars have also developed theories to promote the place of women in the development of the society. Tracing what appears to be the role of philosophers and national laws as cannons to the subjugation of women, Julie Okoh (2012, p. 57) notes that:

National law, philosophers in particular, claimed that the inferior status of women was due to their "inner nature", with the exception of Plato, they all believed that women had powerful emotions and inferior brains with an IQ lower than that of male children. Hence, women could harm themselves as well as others.

She advances her argument further stating that Aristotle developed the widely adopted idea of rationality, arguing that man was a "rational animal" and, as such, has a natural power of reason. Woman, he opined was deficient of rational faculty therefore, "the courage of the man is shown in commanding a woman in obeying" (p. 58). This serious analogy justifies the commitment of society who sees the women as inferior to her male counterpart. Defining feminism as an ideology that centers on the conscious liberation of women from all forms of oppression tendencies, Barbara Berg (1984) declares thus:

[...] the freedom (for a woman) to decide her own destiny; freedom from sex determined roles; freedom from society's oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action. Feminism demands the acceptance of woman's right to individual conscience and judgment; it postulates that women's essential worth stems from their common humanity and does not depend on the relationships of her life (p. 24).

According to Julie Okoh (2012), feminism

is first and foremost a collective term for systems of belief and theories that pay special attention to women's rights and women's position in culture and society. On personal level, it is a state of mind, a way of thinking, an alternate perspective from which to understand the world. It means a woman becoming aware of a distortion in her social status as a woman. Seeking to correct this distortion, the woman moves in a new direction in search of autonomy, self-assertion and empowerment (p. 7).

Indeed, issues of acceptance, freedom and social rights of women have continued to preoccupy the different strands of feminism such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, separatist and lesbian feminism, cultural feminism, socialist feminism, eco-feminism, black feminism, transfeminism, womanism, stivanism etc. In the opinion of Harriet Taylor (1983) feminism is a protest against the institutionalized injustices perpetrated by men, as a group, and advocates the elimination of that injustice by challenging the various structures of authority or power that legitimize male prerogatives in a given society (p. 41). Susan James (1998) describes feminism as:

Grounded on the belief that women are oppressed or disadvantaged by comparison with men, and that their oppression is in some way illegitimate or unjustified [...] the label 'feminist' thus arose out of, and was in many ways with the sequence of diverse campaigns for female emancipation fought throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

For Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the earliest scholars and feminist critics whose interest was primarily to vindicate the rights of women opines that:

Women were believed to be emotional rather than rational; they were expected to cultivate superficial traits such as beauty rather than inner qualities such as virtue. This dehumanization of women stems mainly from the educational

system (designed by men), which does not offer to females the same opportunities for the development of their minds as it does to males (cited in Stumpf & Abel, 2001, p. 530).

Sadly, in terms of superiority, Bracton states that women are inferior to men based on a few factors: they have no status except when widowed, they have no legal rights, and they are somewhat less physically strong. Additionally, women are seen as incomplete men because it was believed that women were not fully developed in the womb. Wollstonecraft again further states that:

Men have thus, in one situation, at least an opportunity of exerting themselves with dignity and of rising by the exertions which really improve a rational creature. But the whole female sex are, till their character is formed, in the condition as the rich—for they are born [...] with certain sexual privileges [...] (cited in Stumpf & Abel, 2001, p. 536).

From the issue of rights and freedom, dramatist and theatre scholars have devised several means of confronting the oppression and dehumanization of women. It is against this backdrop that the study investigates the relationship between the director and the playwright as co-partners in promoting social ideals and supporting equality of both sexes.

### **Synopsis of *Altine's Wrath***

Set within the ambience of marital unfaithfulness, victimization, abuse of office, corruption, and oppression Ahmed Yerima's *Altine's Wrath* reveals the story of Mr. Lawal, a corrupt permanent secretary in government who is seriously into bribery, awarding of illegal contracts and denial of worker's and community rights married to Altine. To flaunt his ill-gotten wealth, he engages in extramarital affairs with different women and brings in Mariam one of his concubines to push Altine out of the house. In the midst of this collective oppression of Altine, Audu and Onene visit to protest the non-payment of their compensations for a piece of land that Mr. Lawal acquired from them in an earlier meeting. The dramatic action takes a different turn as Altine confiscates the entire savings of Mr. Lawal's ill-gotten money which he has been saving in her name.

## Directorial concept: gender equality in *Altine's Wrath*

Exposing the directorial concept of gender equality, the director through his actors and other production elements must consider the thrust in Yerima's *Altine's Wrath*.

Delivering the directorial concept of gender equality, one must evaluate the characters of Mr. Lawal and Mrs. Altine who both represent the different biological genders in most third world countries. As deduced from the his actions, language, comments by other characters and usual physical appearance, Mr. Lawal is a high ranking civil servant that has risen to the rank of permanent secretary in a state ministry. He is a fantastically corrupt and fraudulent character who hides under the government's land use decree to exploit and dispossess indigenous land owners of their land so he can sell it to the higher bidders. He is very treacherous, deceptive, pretentious, and inconsiderate and practically wicked. To demonstrate his superiority and subjugation over his wife Altine, he denies her access to his room for over three years, even when both of them reside under one roof. This action is revealed to Miriam, his mistress as he boasts in the lines below:

Lawal: Look, there is no need for all this. Altine has her own there, at the back of the house. And I've not allowed her to step into my room for over three years now [...] (Yerima, 2000, p. 4).

Lawal's wicked disposition is further exposed in his dialogue with Aina where he charges the latter never to waste her pity on Altine since she does not deserve it. He is pompous, arrogant and extremely proud. He is often irritated at the sight of peasants. He orders Onene and Audu out of his house and when Aina insists that they stay, he responds, thus "well, well... okay for your sake. But not on my chairs! They can use the poufs, or sit on the floor (Yerima, 2000, p. 5).

In spite of his oppressive tendencies, especially to the poor and vulnerable, he is cowardly in the face of danger. He refuses to eat when he discovers Altine's boldness and use of the English language. He represents the rich set of underdeveloped Africans who are conscious of class in anything they do and do not have respect for the place of women in the development agenda of the society.

Altine on the other hand represents the self-assertive and freedom-fighter woman as discovered in the play through her actions, language and

thoughts. She is the heroine; adventurous, persevering and very determined to change the negative perception and image of women. Her creative effort in disguising as a stark illiterate before Lawal and absorbing all the insults which Lawal rains on her just to extract information about Lawal's fraudulent practices is highly ingenious. It further demonstrates the powerful nature of women if they are willing to capture their rightful position in the society. She pretends to be dumb even when Lawal insists on using her thumb print to secure some of his ill-gotten properties in her name. To demonstrate her superior wisdom she appears in action and words at the point that Lawal and his business associate, Alhaji Maikudi are celebrating their envisaged business successes, thus:

**Altine** (Striding about haughtily) I said, did you call, master? It's time for me to go, isn't it? Time to leave your house for the new bride? Is that what you've called to tell me, dear Master? (Yerima, 2000, p. 29).

Her character is that of a woman that is highly industrious, resourceful and a helper as demonstrated through the assistance she rendered to Mr. Lawal paying his bills while he was a student. Understanding the role of education as a weapon of social empowerment, she quietly enrolled in an adult education programme across her street so as to acquire formal education without her husband's knowledge and consent. She represents the voice of the oppressed and intimidated in the society who are willing to empower themselves and fight for their rights.

A reading of the play will clearly expose the issue of gender inequality which is demonstrated in the family of Mr. Lawal and Altine his wife. Examining the character of Mr. Lawal, one sees a bully with high chauvinist dispositions who lives in a world where women should be permanently silenced. His perception of women is obviously demonstrated in the following dialogue:

**Altine:** ...You men can be terrible, I know now from experience. You all think marriage is the modern version of the slave trade.

**Lawal:** Ah, a feminist!

**Altine:** Are you telling me! Why do you think I took to medicine? I am not a combatant. I heal, and that compensates.

**Lawal:** For what?

**Altine:** For everything. Healing the sick compensates. I no longer miss, for instance, the affection which I thought men alone could provide.

**Lawal:** I see. Is that perhaps because you're sick yourself (laughs) (Yerima, 2000, p. 13).



The conversation above raises the issue of gender inequality with both characters representing the male and female genders and expressing their individual opinions in defence of their respective genders. Lawal through his lines represents a strong unrepentant chauvinist who sees women as objects of mockery and must not engage in decision making or even attempt fighting for the protection of their rights. He sees the woman as an individual that is sick if she attempts to deviate from the societal constructed roles for her. He asserts his superiority by insisting obedience to him by in an attempt to be in total control. For Altine, the only template for women to champion their rights and free themselves from the sickness inflicted on them by a society ruled by men is through the feminism platform. She believes that the affection women give to men is useless since they don't reciprocate in this regard.

For the theatre director to propagate the concept of equality, the use of costumes, makeup and the appropriate movements on stage must clearly showcase gender disparity with each of the actors delivering their lines with precision. The blocking of the actors should be through the presentational approach to enable the audience identify the struggle by each of the characters to assert superiority over each other.

Mr. Lawal does not only oppress and showcase his superiority through his conversation with Altine in their domestic quarrels but also recounts the circumstances that led to his marriage to her. In his view, based on the circumstances under which he married Altine, she is her perpetual slave who must obey him irrespective of his actions. After bringing his concubine Mariam to their matrimonial home he cast aspersions at her not minding her presence. For him, she is his slave who must do his bidding and must not react to his amorous engagements with Mariam. He sees women as weaker and empty vessels in terms of rational thinking and contribution to the development of the nation. From the very beginning of his marriage to Altine, he sees Altine as an individual without a thinking cap not just because she is an illiterate but because she is a woman. His concubine Miriam tries to question the rational for his maltreatment of Altine as a piece of furniture and he responds thus:

**Lawal:** ... during the riots... Her father was killed in the riots which followed the first military coup that led to the civil war. So my father brought her mother into our house, to protect her. And that was how the relationship began... Then... then you know how these things happen. She got pregnant... and that was it (Yerima, 2000, p. 9).

Mr. Lawal position is a clear indication that he does not have marital affection for Altine but accidentally married her as a favour due to the pregnancy for which he was responsible. For him, marrying Altine is abominable but he has to accept her as one of the furniture in his home. His impression of women generally is that of sex objects and commodities that can be bought and even sold to the next buyer. He boastfully declares; "... we snap our fingers, and women far more important than you and better than you kill themselves to get into my bed"... (Yerima, 2000, p. 18).

Altine on the other hand observes that the only way to empower herself and liberate herself from the machinations of Mr. Lawal is through education. In one of their rough moments, she exposes her decision and long endured pains thus:

**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!

This effective communication skill perplexes Mr. Lawal who can't believe that the slave and 'empty brain' Altine can suddenly transform to a self-assertive and liberation-conscious woman. In an attempt to register her displeasure and to prove to him that the male is not better than the female folk, she resolves to quit the marriage. In her own wisdom, Mr. Lawal feels the only interest of a woman is to be commodified as a wife and nothing else. Her decision to quit the marriage to a large extent demonstrates the effort of women in refuting the ideology that marriage is the ultimate for the woman. However, the fact that Altine is married does not add to her personality rather it diminishes her womanhood and by extension dehumanizes her as a living creature. She further recounts her experiences in her marriage with Lawal to fully justify her termination of the union. She requested him to account for her financial assistance that made Lawal who he in the following lines:

**Altine:** ... tell her, Lawal, how you were when I met you. How I tended you and served you together, always sacrificing myself, always bowing my head, refusing to listen to the screams of my own inner needs! ... (Yerima, 2000, p. 31).

It is from this point that Lawal realizes his wisdom is more of foolishness to the reality of existence. His idea that Altine is a slave turns out to be that he is the slave in question rather than his victim. Upon the realization that his victim is more rational than he, he pleads for mercy with Altine, thus "... you know you can't do that! Please! I beg you, that's my entire life you're taking away! My whole...!" (Yerima, 2000, p. 33). However, Altine refuses to accept his plea but rather goes further to reveal her ordeal in the early years of their marriage in the following words:

**Altine:** A slave, isn't that all you wanted? Remember, all those years you went to the university, and I had to slave to pay your fees, and maintain the children, as well as your aged-mother-all preserve, her memories, the good woman! She was the one who first called me, months after you came home with your degree. She sat me down one evening to discuss it, how you had changed totally, and how she could no longer recognize you (Yerima, 2000, p. 33).

It is pertinent to state that Yerima's *Altine's Wrath* raises contentious issue of gender inequality as it reveals the derogatory degradation which most men give to women on account of their blind followership of patriarchal values. On the other hand, the play, through the characters of Altine and Aina portrays the dogged and desperate nature of women in their resolve to fight for their rightful place in the society. In the play, the playwright tries to give a balanced view of gender disparities contending that women are integral part of the social process and therefore should not be oppressed, marginalized or subjugated in the name of patriarchy rather they should be seen as partners in progress, complementing each other.

Lawal's inability to acknowledge the important place of women in the society propels his downfall. It is his maltreatment of Altine and by extension the entire women folk that makes Altine in connivance with Aina (another woman) to pull him down as he is forced into losing all his properties and life savings.

## Conclusion

The relationship between the playwright and the director; the script and the performance; the thematic thrust of the script and the directorial concept cannot be overemphasized. Although they exist at different levels with different names, each is influenced by the other at any given

point. This informs why the performance is derived from a script or an idea that may be documented or improvised or devised. From the analysis of the play understudy as a requirement of the interpretative process, one sees gender inequality dominating the story with a resolution that showcases gender equality. The study therefore observes that all humans are equal irrespective of their gender and as such the interpretation of *Altine's Wrath* should be interpreted along the line of gender equality. This interpretation must be achieved through the effective manipulation of what Alexander Dean and Lawrence Carra refer to as the 'fundamentals of play directing.' These fundamentals include composition, picturization, movement, rhythm and pantomimic dramatization. The director should also creatively cast actors with the required gender, voice level and other physical and histrionic nuances of the different characters. This will support his interpretation of the concept of gender equality as will be accepted by the audience. This acceptance will support in the fight against gender discrimination prevalent in most human societies especially in the under-developed countries.

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