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Rejecting Stereotypic Cultural Vulnerability in the Works of Two Nigerian Female Playwrights

ABSTRACT. Living in a patriarchal society can be challenging to women, especially those who have no income source. This makes women jittery, voiceless, vulnerable, aggressive and unassertive. Using Julie Okoh's *Our Wife Forever* and Stella Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of the Bumpy Chested*, this paper interrogates women's cultural vulnerability and economic sustenance within a society that makes most women dependent. Through the use of textual/content analysis, the paper uses Alice Walker's (1984) womanist theory as its theoretical framework to examine the gender issues in the selected play texts. However, the paper observes that the collaborative efforts of both genders in society can help bring economic, social, physical and psychological independence that can help build a less patriarchal society that limits the female gender. Nevertheless, the paper concludes that while gender issues in the society has always been a complex and cultural one, the female gender needs to accept their complimentary positions where need be and be competitive in order to create a public sphere that will accommodate them as well. Therefore, this paper recommends that the female gender needs more empowerment through education, funds, and psychological stability rather than sitting and attending to the private sphere alone that makes them vulnerable.

KEYWORDS: gender, female, womanism, femininity, culture

Introduction

In any patriarchal society, economic sustenance is necessary for both sexes. Failure to have this economic independence and sustenance might lead to a collapsed family system that invariably affects society. According to Adeoye (2010, p. 149), he sees that some African men are dictatorial, domineering and gender sensitive in most of their social lives. Women are, therefore, seen as objects of sex and symbols to be permanently subjugated and enslaved. Adeoye's view shows the typical African society whereby men are seen as the Alpha and Omega which makes most women see themselves as less important. In Nigeria, the rift between the male and

the female gender over duties, responsibilities, views, opinions and rights have been in existence from time immemorial, but the need for the female gender to negotiate her ways through has become shortened. This is related to the economic situation in the Nigeria patriarchal system where the need for division of labour and collaborative effort is expected in order for the sustenance of most families. While both sexes' biological roles still remain different, the economic situation in Nigeria has almost made the financial responsibilities of the man and the woman among the labour force the same. However, for any woman with a source of income in the present-day Nigeria, she becomes a force to reckon with, a woman of substance and a woman of esteem who is able to take care of herself and at times, people around her.

In this paper, the cultural vulnerability and economic sustenance in the works of Julie Okoh and Stella Oyedepo are explored in order to show that women are better off when they have sources of income rather than staying at home being catered for by their husbands or family members. Enejere (1991, p. 49) sees that "the problem of women looms large. Economic backwardness, ignorance, religious prejudice and obsolete ideas about women's place at home and in society still tell on their position". This shows how culture plays a very significant role in the way and manner a woman is perceived and received within her own society. Cultural mentality that has been imbibed since childhood affects not only the woman but the man as well. This brings to the fore the gendered society that teaches the woman to be silent, passive, obedient and subservient, while the man is to be vocal, active, egoistic and outgoing. In this 21st Century, most of these gendered situations seem to be changing due to society's economic and modernised view. Utoh-Ezeajugh (2015, p. 134) observes that Nigerian female playwrights have over the years evolved a literary style that is unique in its committed presentation and representation of the African woman. Through such female writings, women are repositioned and given voices in order to fight any limitations such as cultural, societal, economic or religious issues that may come their way.

Theoretical Framework

Although women may be said to vary globally, there are certain issues that are general to them no matter the age, class, ethnicity or belief. Using Alice Walker (1984) Womanist theory which seeks to acknowledge

and praise the sexual power of black women while recognising the history of sexual violence against them, this paper identifies three major features that are cogent. These three major features are audaciousness, woman-centredness and community-centredness which are often used as means for analysing black women's literature as it marks the place where race, class, gender, economic capability and sexuality intersect. Walker sees black women as people wanting to know more, people who are always in pursuit of knowledge despite their deprivation in a male dominated society. Although Walker's womanist definition has generated a lot of controversy, especially from the African feminist critics who at first believed that womanism as a theory may satisfy their search for a female discourse that is all encompassing, some still see it as a theory that analyses women's discourse and a new form of power that can end sexism, racism and classism. For this paper, womanism is seen as a commitment to the survival and wholesomeness of both male and female living in the same society in order to make a sane society. Nevertheless, the meaning of womanism seems to be deeply embedded in the religious and political tradition of empowerment whereby various ethnic and interest groups compete for equality of opportunities, rights, and respect to all groups.

While Okoh and Oyedepo's female protagonists (Victoria and Sharp), seek to redefine themselves outside their sexual/nurturing/cultural functions, and seek to reinforce the right to reclaim their own sexuality as they see it outside the demands of society, the gendered culture is put to the test. However, such actions may be identified as a form of the aesthetic of assertiveness which these female characters seek to help them re-engage with themselves. Employing the aesthetic of assertiveness as part of womanist struggle, the women are allowed to use their bodies, actions and languages as working tools to see potential ways out of the flaws their socio-cultural situations have caused them.

Synopsis of Julie Okoh's *Our Wife Forever*

The play seems metaphorical with the title 'Our Wife Forever'. Although, it a simple sentence, yet, with deep meaning. The play presents the reality of levirate system in Nigeria and how disgusting it can be to a widow who should be left alone to mourn the dead husband. *Our Wife Forever* discusses the relevance of love, trust, financial capability and cultural vulnerability in marriage. Victoria, the main character, who has just

lost her husband, is troubled by her brother-in-law, Thomas, who wants to marry her in order to have all the late brother's properties. Ironically, Thomas fails to realize that no one can force a woman into such an archaic cultural expectation in this 21st Century, and the so-called properties have been worked for by both Victoria and her dead husband, Hector. Despite Thomas anger, pride and ego, Victoria wins the court case against him and falls in love with Hector's friend, Felix, who has been helpful from the beginning to the end of the play.

Synopsis of Stella Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of the Bumpy Chested*

The Rebellion of the Bumpy Chested by Stella Oyedepo discusses the plight of women incapability, vulnerability and subjugation within the society and the need for them to liberate themselves. Sharp, the leader of the women group "Bumpy Chested Movement" (BCM) is seen as a motivator, orator and assertive who is always in constant talk with other women (old and young) to see themselves as human and not as domestic slaves. While Oyedepo presents the women in the play as strong-willed by neglecting their domestic functions to behave like men, the men take it upon themselves to see a role-reversal by dressing like women, taking care of the children and domestic spheres and also hawking. However, Oye believes that there is no equality even in cosmic arrangements, so women should learn to understand their domestic roles. Sharp in her own way views that women should be given opportunities to act politically, socially, economically and religiously instead of being forced to obey the socio-cultural arrangement of gender.

Rejecting Cultural Vulnerability in the Selected Plays

Culture is never static. Every social group has an identity that is peculiar to their way of life, which differentiates them from others and makes them unique. Tsebee (2011, p. 30) sees culture as that complete whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. This shows that culture exists and develops on people's preservation of certain perspectives. Eagleton (2000), as quoted by Yerima (2015, p. 16) says:

culture is not some vague fantasy of fulfillment, but a set of potentials bred by history and subversively at work within it. The culture which I speak about is one which emerges from civilisation—that is if we accept civilisation as a process of human development.

To Eagleton and Yerima, culture is an evolving process that people work towards in order to have a heritage. Due to the Nigerian patriarchal cultural practice, women tend to be vulnerable and subjugated. The economic situation in the country makes women see themselves as second class citizens who see certain jobs and professions as that of their male counterparts. However, things are drastically changing as women are negotiating themselves into what was previously considered taboo, cultural and unattainable sphere. This is visible in the works of the selected playwrights whereby women have deconstructed the cultural beliefs of the society that sees them as 'other'. According to McCann and Kim (2003, p. 33), the concept of other is that which represents a male-dominated culture that views women as the other in relation to man. While this is not the crust of discussion, Walker's womanism has been able to deal successfully with this concept and through the analysed selected plays, othering has been re-ordered so as to make women visible in their society. Okoh and Oyedepo re-present women as partners in cultural development whereby women can also speak for themselves rather than being spoken for. For example, in Oyedepo's *The Rebellion...* (2002, p. 40), Akanbi expresses his disgust and anger towards the women folk to his brother-in-law, Saka, that:

AKANBI: ...I no longer have any say in the affairs of my home. It's Tara who dominates everything. My house now has a single legislative member and that's Tara... if I want to take pounded yam, she declares that 'eba' will be more beneficial to my health... If I go right, she goes left,... you know it can be maddening! ...she has seized matrimonial power. And you would agree with me that power is not a right property to be found in a woman.

Tara's action shows her negotiating skill, which helps her maintain the dignity she feels her gender needs have been trampled on to a large extent due to cultural and social limitations. Oyedepo does not portray Tara as a "feminist" character per se, but as a woman who is human and is capable of getting tired at any given time and a woman who may want to do something else at that particular time when the husband requests pounded yam or something unattainable. To Oyedepo, women need to be treated with all sense of respect and dignity. Also, Tara is seen as a woman who is capable

of thinking and not be thought for. However, Akanbi feels scared and jittery due to his wife's audacious nature and her disdainful nature to culture, which has been in existence for long.

Meanwhile, in Okoh's *Our Wives Forever*, the heroine sees her economic situation as an avenue of liberating herself to the extent that she boasts about it to her brother-in-law. Being independent as a woman helps build the home, gives a woman the necessary voice and the negotiating power. Victoria in this play portrays this through her analysis of the brother-in-law who is bent on marrying her:

VICTORIA: When Hector died you wanted to take both of them from me, I refused. Since then, you have never given them any money, not even to buy soap. We have managed to survive without any help from any of you. We will continue to survive by the grace of God. As for their school fees, it will be paid as soon as I receive my salary (p. 51).

Victoria's oppression can be seen from three different categories which are, (i) as a wife (ii) as a woman and (iii) as a widow. Instead of Thomas to help her sustain the dead brother's legacy and catering for the children, he is more interested in having a relationship with Victoria because of the gains he expects. While widowhood can be frustrating especially if the woman in question is left at the mercy of the deceased, in-laws treatment of widowhood situation can be disgusting at times. Thomas in Okoh's selected to play is a man of pride who sees nothing good in his late brother's wife because she refuses to marry him, rather, he accuses her of engaging in illicit affairs with the brother's friend, Felix.

The issue of nauseating in-laws is dealt with in Oyedepo's play as well. Ashake, one of the strong women in the play clearly expresses her view that she is in charge of her husband and home as she proclaims that:

ASHAKE: May be you haven't heard the news yet. Women are no longer ready to tolerate nauseating in-laws like you who have been fed with fusty ideas about the place of women in the society... You think my personality is to be mauled and debased? And I should subject myself to all sorts of indignities all because I took pity on a lonely man by marrying your brother? But I say, I am no longer ready to tolerate dunderhead twerps like you!... I will send you out of here. You have no business being here... Even to grandpa's face. I am going to say it loud and clear that women will no longer tolerate the menace... As from now, you just must spend your holidays with your parents, if you aren't prepared to be serviceable to me... I shall brook no nonsense! I shall give orders and you must

obey. If you refuse to obey you must go back to the village... this is my domain and I am the despot here! (p. 22–24).

From protest against obnoxious cultural practices, opposition to oppressive machinery, to the affirmation of ideals, the works of Nigerian female playwrights read like signposts to political, social, economic and cultural emancipation. To her, the experiences of these women have gradually culminated in a radical edge to the plays of Nigeria female playwrights.

With the selected works of Okoh and Oyedepo, the shared roles of both genders are brought to fore but at the same time, the socio-cultural and economic factors that discriminate against women are presented. According to Akinwale (2010, p. 291), he attests that:

Women in Nigeria are beginning to step out of their cultural shells to excel in their chosen professions. Today, some are managers of big companies and banks, owners and medical doctors of several health clinics, professors in the academia and even presidential candidates of some political parties in the country... in theatre and entertainment world in Nigeria.

In Okoh's *Our Wife Forever*, the enthusiastic nature of a woman willing to work in togetherness with her husband is showcased:

VICTORIA: If we lose the case, will they really chase me out of this house? The house that I labored so hard to build! When we just got married, Hector and I used to live in a small apartment, behind their family house. After the birth of our first child, we felt the need to have a home of our own. Hector was very busy then, writing articles for his promotion. So, I took up the challenge. Apart from my official employment, I had a big poultry. I sold eggs, I sold chicken and occasionally I sold turkeys to raise the fund to buy every materials used for building this house. Now, Tom wants to take our house from me just because I am a woman (p. 65).

Victoria's lines show that when a woman is cherished by her husband, she is ready to do anything at all costs for the man to succeed. In Nigeria, which is the setting of the play, the gendered situation is clearly visible whereby the compatibility between a man and woman is not an easy task. This is due to the fact that women are often seen in relation to their biological capability and men are viewed from their social egoistic nature. Most women in the cultural Nigerian system have suffered from male ego syndrome which either leaves them at the mercy of any avail-

able man at one time or the other in their lives. The issue of gender that creates a stereotyped nature is not new but how the so-called 'weaker vessel' is able to deconstruct the social and cultural expectations matter. Although, some of Oyedepo's characters like Sharp and Tara are seen as the opposite of what the woman should be in the play, they still represent how a sane society should treat women regardless of gender. Nwosu (2004, p. 2) observes that:

No matter how gifted a woman is, no matter her ingenuity and political exploits, she can only be recognized in her society as a good and caring mother. Any other ambitious image a woman portrays outside this stereotype model earns her derogatory names like iron lady, domineering lady, or even the Biblical notorious name—Jezebel.

To a large extent, this is true in most patriarchal societies whereby women are often taken for granted and seen in relation to their biological roles; any attempt to operate outside these recognized roles is taken as disrupting the social order created by men and cultural values.

Womanist Perspective of the Selected Plays

Womanist aesthetics main focus irrespective of race, ethnicity, cultural background, religious beliefs and social context is the struggle to have gendered-balanced society and fair treatment for women within the patriarchal system. In Okoh and Oyedepo's plays, the womanist view helps their main characters (Victoria and Sharp) to be socially, politically, economically and culturally independent. This helps them eradicate the perceived subjugation that they go through both in the public and private spheres that Ojediran (2012, p. 23) sees as "advocating equality for women; campaigning for women's capability and women's interests and sexuality in the society". Both playwrights show the ability of women to redress the abnormalities in the cultural settings that limit women's dignity within a relegating tradition. Despite Victoria's victimization by Thomas and the archaic tradition in *Our Wife Forever*, her womanist view helps her to choose what she wants for her life and children after the death of her husband. Also, Okoh uses Victoria's character to show the inhuman treatment women go through all in the name of widowhood and traditional customs which makes women subdued. In Victoria's lamentation:

VICTORIA: Oh, what a life! Suddenly, I have become a prisoner. As outcast! I shouldn't go here and there. I shouldn't do this or that. No one should come near me. No one should reach out to me. All types of laws are heaped on me. Just because I am a widow!... (p. 33).

Ironically, Okoh uses Felix to balance the gendered perspective of late Hector's family approach to make a woman relevant and be able to take decisions of her free will. In his reply to Victoria, Felix sees her as a woman who should not be disrespected, punished, subjugated or maltreated.

FELIX: Please don't get me wrong. You are certainly not an outcast. If you need me, I will never abandon you. Trust me (p. 34).

Felix is seen as a collaborator in the play. He helps Victoria who is the representation of female hood to attain her womanist goal. Felix refuses to see the woman as the subjugated entity or second fiddle who should continuously be deprived of her fundamental human rights regarding of freedom of speech, action and thought.

In Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of the Bumpy Chested*, Sharp, Ashake, Tara and Falilat are seen as women of substance, women who are ready to dominate rather than been dominated on, women who are ready to reconstruct the social structure of gender in the inter and intra-relationships they are. For example, Sharp observes that:

SHARP: This life of drudgery to which women have been sentenced throughout the ages must alter for a better one. Men should be asked to descend from the Olympic heights in which they have carved an exclusive niche and shake hands with women in the platform of equality. Women must emerge from a state of submissiveness to that of parity of not of dominance (p. 16-17).

Also, Falilat makes her intention known that she is intolerant to any misbehaviour from men. Falilat in her words sees that:

FALILAT: I have a right, a natural right to lead a free and fair existence. So man, I am not ready to take orders like a toady. Enough is enough!... which functions did the nature allot me? (p. 31).

All these women are the epitome of what Walker (1984, p. xi-xii) sees as womanish women who are ready to know, women in search of their identities, women who are ready to charge of their beings and women who want to re-other their existences within the patriarchal societies they belong.

Conclusion

Walker's definition of womanism that it is:

...the black folk expression of mothers to female children, you acting woma-nish, i.e. like a woman... usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageo-us, 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 cultu-re... 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... (Walker, 1984, p. xi-xii).

Nevertheless, this paper sees Walker's womanism as more of coalition solidarity which tends to forge the generalisation of unity, identity, capa-bility and justice that can hardly be mediated through the study of gender, culture and language. The analysed plays go beyond a feminist theatrical reading, but that which calls for personal and social recognition through their women narrations, dialogues and conversations. While the plays present cultural vulnerability, social subjugation and economic depen-dence of women at the beginning, these heroic women are able to navigate the public sphere which is male dominated to help build a balanced gen-dered society whereby women and men can live without either of them been seen as the 'other'. Although Walker's analysis of women's strengths, capabilities and independence considers men as part of women's life and calls for the collaboration of racial, economic, emotional and cultural di-vergences amongst all, women are to be conscious of the infringements on their rights at every point in time.

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