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Representation of the Empowered Woman in Bode Ojoniyi's *Our Wife Has Gone Mad*: An Issue in National Development

ABSTRACT. Bode Ojoniyi is one of the few male playwrights who have shown great interest in the female question in contemporary Nigerian society. The female protagonist in Bode Ojoniyi's play is an assertive, strong, educationally empowered woman who has transcended the private life to the fore of public life, where she contributes to the socio-economic and human development of the nation. This study examines the image of an educationally empowered female protagonist in the drama of Bode Ojoniyi and the methods used by Ojoniyi in representing her to determine the implication of the playwright's style and technique on both the audience's response as well as human and national development. To achieve the above objectives, Bode Ojoniyi's play, *Our Wife Has Gone Mad*, which emphasizes a professional female character, is critically analyzed to reveal the intricate relationship of character, subject matter and style in determining the overall message of the play.

KEYWORDS: patriarchy, gender, equality, oppression, farce

Introduction

The biggest challenge facing women in the world today is patriarchy. This is especially obvious in the family where gender roles are clearly spelt out. Therefore, both men and women are expected to live up to their culturally assigned roles. Any attempt by women to break out from the chrysalis of patriarchy is usually frowned upon. Regardless of a woman's education, experience or abilities, the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society fosters the perception that women are less qualified and less competent than men. This is because, according to Nonyelum Chibuzo Mba (2015, p. 96): "Africa, precisely Nigeria has cultural roles assigned to both men and women". The social roles in traditional African society seem to position men at the centre of life where they wield unrestricted power in both public and private life. From the traditional point of view, according

to Helena Hassan (1992, p. 5) “women have been given specific roles, well defined as wife, mother, sister, co-wife, in-law, daughter, grandmother and widow which are supposedly subordinate and inferior to the man’s and they entail carrying out of all the daily burdens of life”.

The status of women too, all over the world, but particularly in Nigeria, has been undergoing rapid changes in the recent decades. This phenomenon, therefore, has drawn the attention of literary artists, theorists and sociologists. According to Ruby Davaseeli (2011, p. 30):

the change in the position of women in any society is a reliable pointer to social change in general. The modern woman has awakened into a new realization of her place and position in family and society, is conscious of her individuality. She has been trying to assert and ascertain her right as a human being and is determined to fight for equal treatment with men.

Irrespective of the changing status of women, studies have shown that although some Nigerian drama by men has strong female characters as agents of moral, socio-cultural and even economic reformers, it has remained silent or at best suspicious of the activities aimed at changing their subservient position in gender relation. According to Osita Ezenwanebe (2009, p. 190):

African plays on women in social relationship locate women within family circles. Yerima is the most outstanding male playwrights in Nigerian theater that concerns his plays with the female question in contemporary Nigerian society. The plays under study are on women, marriage and family life. Prominent among these plays are *The Wives*, *The Sisters*, *The Portraits*, and *The Mirror Cracks*. The female protagonists of these plays are economically self-reliant. Yerima’s drama on gender issues interrogates the role of educated women within the family. *The Wives and The Sisters* are exclusively of female characters with only references to male. *The Mirror Cracks and The Portraits* portray male and female in a battle of position and supremacy and its consequent effect on themselves and the children.

Most of these male authored plays ranging from Ola Rotimi’s *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, Ahmed Yerima’s *Mirror Cracks*, *The Portraits* and Bode Ojoniyi’s *Our Wife Has Gone Mad* presents a farcical representation of women issues. The farcical-cum-comic style of these male-authored plays deflects its essence. The issues portrayed become means of vigorous entertainment instead of being catalyst for a rigorous

post performance discussion that can bring about revolutionary change as in the theatre of Shaw, Ibsen, or Chekov. Ezenwanebe (2009, p. 192) observes that:

Nigerian male playwrights are ambivalent about woman liberation, and they express their fears in their style., Though many plays by Nigerian male playwrights support the education of the girl child and denounce women oppression, for example, the oppression of widows as properties in Yerima's *Aetu*, yet the playwrights are ambivalent in supporting the programmes or activities that can liberate these women from their slavish and subdued position in the society.

In light of the above, this study is concerned with Bode Ojoniyi's *Our Wife has Gone Mad*. The play sounds like warnings to the reader on the dangers inherent in women empowerment through education that can change the traditional gender power structure. However, the female protagonist is undaunted in her fight for equal dignity, educational opportunity and privileges.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Radical feminist theory. Radical Feminism is a movement that takes its root from Western ideology. It is a perspective within feminism that singles out patriarchy as a system of power that oppresses women. It aims to challenge and overthrow patriarchy by opposing societal gender roles and oppression of women. This group argues that women's subordination is not rooted in relation of production but in specific relations to reproduction and sexuality that the use of word and language affect our psyche on the definition of men and women. According to Godiya Makama (2013, p. 119), "they point to the effectiveness of the capacity of language to shape our thoughts and desires...". This movement, therefore, calls for a radical reordering of society.

Radical feminists lay emphasis only on women's experiences and do not see anything virtuous in men. They advocate the need for women to unite in a common sisterhood that transcends class or race for a successful revolt against male dominance. They feel that the control of women by men extends from the public world to private life in homes, so man becomes the target. Ann Oakley (1975, p. 129) maintains that radical steps must be taken to liberate women:

First, the housewife role must be abolished. Oakley rejects less radical solutions such as payments for housework, which, she argues, will simply reinforce the woman equals housewife equation. Second, the family as it now stands must be abolished. This proposal follows from the first since the housewife and mother roles are part and parcel of the same thing. Abolishing the family will also serve to break the circle of daughter learning her role from mother, son learning his role from his father. Third, the sexual division of labour must be eradicated in all areas of social life.

Perhaps, this extreme stance explains why many scholars often misunderstand feminism and regard feminists as aggressive men-haters. This also explains why some African women do not want to associate themselves with feminist ideology. Accordingly, in condemnation of Western brands of feminism, they come up with many other concepts to advocate the emancipation of women from the African perspective.

Concerned with the issue of women's rights and freedom, dramatists and theatre scholars have employed several means of tackling the oppression and subjugation of women. Against this backdrop, the study examines the style adopted by Bode Ojoniyi, a Nigerian male playwright, in addressing social ideals and equality of men and women.

The Image of the Educationally Empowered Woman in Bode Ojoniyi's *Our Wife Has Gone Mad*

The play, *Our Wife Has Gone Mad* by Bode Ojoniyi won the SONTA-Olu Obafemi award for unpublished play. *Our Wife Has Gone Mad* by Bode Ojoniyi captures the plight of women as wives in the family. The story revolves around Daniela and her three husbands. Daniela is the first wife of Alhaji and a Petro chemical engineer whose money Alhaji uses to marry and maintain his other wives without her knowledge. When she discovers that she is being deceived, manipulated and exploited by her husband, Alhaji, she resolves to marry a second and a third husband—all three spread across Lagos, Port Harcourt and Beijing, China. She keeps secret affairs with them and bore each of them a son as well. The truth, however, is revealed when Daniela is involved in a ghastly road accident and is in a coma for sometimes. On her recovery from a coma, she confronts the three men whom she has also been the breadwinner for years. In *Our Wife Has Gone Mad*, Bode Ojoniyi takes the struggle for gender equality to the realm of the ludicrous. This is because, according to Ameh Dennis Akoh, "while it

is common to hear of women who are married to more than one man in a lifetime, it is normally after a divorce or death of the husband" (Ojoniyi, 2021, p. 6).

Among the wives of Alhaji, Dr Daniela's economic empowerment through formal education is clearly emphasized. She is a Petrochemical engineer and has a doctorate degree. She has married two other men because of Alhaji's insincerity. It is revealed in the play that Alhaji kept her in the dark about his marriage to the other women since she was away on an assignment on the rig in Port-Harcourt. This is reminiscent of Lejoka Brown, the protagonist in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, who withholds the information concerning his marriage with other women from Liza, the American trained medical doctor, whom he met while was in Congo. In both plays, the men are represented as he-devils: vicious, reckless and deceptive while the two empowered women are represented as victims, but the styles of representation undermine the audience's sympathy for them. Beneath their pitiable experiences at the hand of the men is a gentle satire, which evokes not pity but derision. When Daniela learns of Alhaji's deceit, she sees their relationship as being washed up and gives him the push without delay. Daniela condemns Alhaji's deceptive tactics to force her into polygamy, and makes known her rejection of polygamy in clear terms when she addresses Alhaji in strong terms, saying:

Daniela: Just three months into our marriage, Alhaji! You did not even give me any breathing space. If I was not already carrying our baby, I would quit the marriage right then. I held on. And, to safe myself from mental degeneration because of the love you betrayed, I went to start my PhD immediately. I substituted your love for my studies, for books! Immediately I finished my PhD, I requested to be taken back to Port-Harcourt. I made up my mind to marry a second husband, this time around, not as playing any second fiddle role to any man! So, I went for this distrust Akpan. I brought him out of poverty. I spent money on him... (Ojoniyi, 2021, p. 50).

The truth, however, is revealed when Daniela is involved in a ghastly road accident and is in a coma for sometimes. The comatose state of Daniela brings together all the men in her life: her three husbands, who all gathered to know the condition of her health. Initially, the matron thought it was wise to keep her secret by preventing the men from meeting each other during hospital visits. Surprisingly enough, Daniela turns down the matron's suggestion and insists that she wants the men to meet each other. Whatever mistakes she has made, she believes that no one will blame her.

Alhaji is astonished at Daniela's confession about other men in her life and even meeting them. He tries to know where he has gone wrong:

Alhaji: Wait, I am already coming out. I hope it will all just be a strange nightmare and nothing more [He steps out of the toilet] ... just a strange nightmare with no concrete meaning...

Daniela: Unfortunately, Alhaji, this is not a drama! This is a reality. I can agree with the fact that it could be illusionary somehow because you are just being confronted with its facts, but it is real, my dear Alhaji! It is real (Ojoniyi, 2021, p. 49).

The reality of the situation hits Alhaji like a thunderbolt as he probes to find what and how his wife was transformed. At this point, the matron urges Daniela on, so as to find out what led her into the decision of marrying three husbands. Daniela says:

Daniela: No! Not really because of him. I did it because of myself. I did it because of our culture. I did it to rewrite the traditions. I did it to make significant contribution to our way of life. I did it to deconstruct and reconstruct reality. In any case, what really is a reality out of what you see or perceive? (Ojoniyi, 2021, p. 52).

The above may look like a eulogy of women empowerment to an uncritical mind, but it embodies the playwright's style of gentle satire, a refined technique of subtly castigating what is disapproved of. Daniela's deceitful nature in the name of setting women free from their oppressive condition is undoubted, inconsistent with the ideological underpinning of African feminism, which aims at extolling the virtues of womanhood. An African audience is skeptical about this kind of freedom. Would deceit or revenge put an end to women oppression in the African context? She is guilty of committing the same atrocity men are being accused of. Her action suggests a lack of patience, heartlessness and intolerance. The African audience will never like to identify with her character. Osita Ezenwanebe (2008, p. 91) says that "Feminist theatre critics insist that creating strong female characters with whom the audience can identify with is one of the most important functions feminist theatre can perform in the hands of a feminist writer". Sadly, feminism is seen as a derogatory term in Africa. Numerous women and men who are sympathetic with the plight of women in Africa are too careful in using their dramatic works to pro-

mote gender equality. This ambivalence gives rise to all kinds of distortion in works that deal with the female question. It is gathered from Ojoniyi's *Our Wife Has Gone Mad* that patriarchy has done to convince people that a strong and intelligent woman represents a problem; a disruption to the social order rather than an integral part of it. The case of Daniela seems to affirm all that is unacceptable in African feminism. In representing this woman of high learning, the playwright blames her for the breakdown of her marriage and its devastating effects on her family. However, the presentation of Daniela by the playwright situates her as a representation of the woman more concerned with subverting the male character instead of being a solution to the leadership problem within the family nucleus and the society at large. Daniela undertakes a revenge mission on Alhaji, an action which will definitely create more unending problems and challenges in the family and society than bring a solution to the already existing problems. Alhaji laments "Daniela, you have ruined my life. You have ruined my home. See how I am losing everything" (Ojoniyi, 2021, p. 53). Osita Ezenwanebe (2009, p. 199) says that "the art of repudiating learned or high educated women even when they are victims ... implies that economic powers through education is the bane behind marriage failures". In Stella Oyedepo's *On his Demise*, Pa Timo, Salli's father states this unequivocally while protesting how his son, Salli, is minding his baby. He laments: "See, this is the type of havoc education has done to this society. Women no longer know their responsibility just because they are educated" (p. 10). According to Ezenwanebe (2008, p. 200–201):

It is the style of the playwright that conditions audience response whether approvingly or otherwise one thing stands out in Balogun's apt observation; that is, the need to imbue the heroes or heroines of literary works with those qualities that attest to our aesthetic preferences. The 20th century saw an outburst of the reconstruction of African women, and it is important that it should be done in line with the womanist propositions. African women carved out of western feminism, principles that guide the reconstruction of African women so that the "new eve" is not alienated from the African context.

Surely, Daniela is not a good example of the "new eve" envisaged by the womanists. However, an artist is free to adopt any approach in recreating reality and may not really bother whether his art satisfies one ideology or the other. It is important that writers should note the argument of Abiodun Balogun (1999, p. 51) when he says that:

The heroes of the literary works of any group of people are a reliable source of ascertaining the aesthetic preferences of such people... In the second place, the society reveals its biases by the way it reacts either approvingly or disapprovingly of the characters and materials contained in a work of literature.

Drama, as Gurr and Calden (1974, p. 6), observe has “a double function in ... society. It records the present holding a mirror up to society and it paints a picture of the future, it offers a possible vision of how the present can be improved”. Hence, drama not only interprets the past and the present but also charts a way forward for the people. In her inaugural lecture, Ezeigbo (2008, p. 16) boldly asserts that “literature (a many the Humanities) is the most efficacious subject or discipline to provide the humanistic education this country needs to make progress...”. Hence an artist is visionary, charting the course for future development and equipping people with the right morals, knowledge, and aspiration.

Just like Daniela, Alhaji’s other two wives condemns in bolder terms, the patriarchal belief that results in a flagrant disregard of women’s opinion in decision-making even in matters affecting their lives. Alhaji deceives his other wives. He denies them the knowledge that Daniela is the sole breadwinner of the family. As soon as Alhaja and Segi realizes their unequal position in the house, they resolve to desert their matrimonial home. Alhaja says “Alhaji, it is a disaster to be married to a man who is not a man. We are going. If we are still at home when you return, we will hear how it is resolved” (Ojoniyi, 2021, p. 53). In Ojoniyi’s *Our Wife Has Gone Mad*, Elder D, one of Daniela’s husbands, exclaims that “Indeed, our wife has gone mad” (Ojoniyi, 2021, p. 51). Daniela is called a mad woman simply because she refuses to play along with the cultural dictates of society and accept a subordinate position within the family.

The play is set in a patriarchal society, with cultural expectations of what a man and woman’s role is. In this society represented in the play, we witness the unquestioning acceptance of male superiority as it is implied in Daniela’s statement when she says that “He is not a whore since his actions are sanctioned by Allah. I am a whore because I carried out my own decisions and desires... and invented my own culture. Matron than you for restraining the animal” (Ojoniyi, 2021, p. 54). Here, it is obvious that culture and religion play a very significant role in women oppression. According to Osita Ezenwanebe (2011, p. 284): “The man believes he has the right to sexual freedom. He can sleep around with as many women as possible, holding claims to the traditional culture of polygamy. Male infi-

delity in marriage is no news but even suspected female infidelity makes a lot of news". In the case of Daniela, she appropriates the same liberty or privileges given to men and marries the men. She does not cheat on the first husband; she merely legally gets married to the other two men and keeps them in their different cities.

Conclusion

Bode Ojoniyi in *Our Wife Has Gone Mad* is concerned with the cultural oppression of women. In using the comic-farcical approach to feminism, Bode Ojoniyi trivializes its ideals. He achieves the ridiculing of feminist ideals by misrepresentation. He makes the ideals too confusingly ambiguous as to be objectionable. The technique of using an educationally empowered woman, Daniela to teach the ideals of freedom to African women in African society is wholly unacceptable to African feminists or "womanists". Daniela is a typical representative of all that is repulsive in women—she is deceitful, immodest and represents all that is abominable in the African mother and wife. Given the ideological underpinning of womanism, Daniela became a kind of liability in the course of strenuous efforts to objectify women as good, amicable creatures. Even when Daniela is portrayed in the play as a loving, caring and understanding wife and mother, since she caters for the welfare of the men in her life, her level of deceit is magnified, since she tries to lure Elder D and Chin Chung into marriage. This is surely beyond the limits of postulations of womanism which aims to extol the virtues of womanhood.

For the interest of human and national development, African drama should veer away from the farcical representation of women issues and see it as a serious subject matter for theatre recreated in line with womanist principles in order to portray educationally empowered women which the audience can identify with.

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