

DILATING AND DIFFUSING WOMEN'S HEROISM AND FEMINIST PECULIARITIES IN *THE GODS ARE STILL NOT TO BLAME* AND *QUEEN AMINA OF ZAUZZAU*

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Abstract

Evaluating the role of women in a given society varies considerably as the perception and assumptions differ from one society to another. While some construct a demeaning notion through marginalization/prejudice of the gender and thus their classification as weaker sex, others hypothesize that women are the most delicate yet, powerful and dangerous spices. The evidence of the second construct is projected and re-emphasized in Otun Rasheed's *The Gods Are Still Not To Blame* and Ben Tomoloju's *Queen Amina of Zauzzau*. This selected plays appear at variant with the concept of heroism as championed by the classicists and the new trend of heroic delineation conceived by Author Miller in *Tragedy of a Common Man*. This study opens discussion on the possibility of gender twist toward a new conceptuality of heroic forms as echoed in the play texts in spite of the Nigeria's patriarchal society. This paper however adopts the sociological and feminist theory in its methodology to chronicle the unnoticeable feat and total disregard for women heroism.

Keywords: Feminism, Heroism, Peculiarity, Womanhood and Patriarchal Society

Introduction

Africa and by extension Nigeria is no doubt a patriarchal society, where women are only to be seen and not to be heard, those who belong to the kitchen, bearer and caterer of the children. Some of these societies do not even have a single regard for the woman as special specie talk less of being a hero. However, many women have emerged heroic in the past and their names ring bells at the mention of such names like Mother Teresa, Martha Graham, Queen Elizabeth, Queen Idia of Benin, Queen Amina of Zauzzau and so many; even in sport and other professions around the world. Religiously and politically speaking, the neglect of woman is no difference. Women are always the second fiddle. For instance, visit the mosque, the women are separated from the men, and they are to cover their heads, no freedom of association and exhibition of their God given beauty in the name of religion. However, not until recently when some radical feminist emerged and revolutionized the female gender from the claws of the male dominated 'world' and stood their ground for equality in all ramifications, right to everything the man thinks he is and has, even in sex.

The revolution brought about awareness of self-realization and self-esteem. However, the movement (feminism) is not too firm in Africa because of some traditions, customs, culture and nuances that have enslaved or curtailed the African woman from many social tenets. The African woman herself, believes in the supremacy of the man in many aspects of life, like the man is the crown of her head, the head of the

family, so he (the man) has some God given authority over her, as such, she accords him that respect. Nonetheless, for the African woman to be part of the revolution (feminism) and due to the aforementioned peculiarities, African women have to water down the radical feminism by christening theirs as liberal feminism or womanism. The reasons are not farfetched. First and foremost, their beliefs, religious practice and cultural background which have always been the case in almost facet of an African woman.

The ideology behind some of these brands of feminism and even the implementations of their agenda were, to some non- western activists extreme and somewhat insensitive to their peculiar circumstances, hence the perceived need for alternative, more suitable nomenclature (Odi, 2014).

Tragedy Defined and Redefined

Tragedy is a drama or literary work in which the main character is brought to ruin or suffer extreme sorrow, especially as a consequence of a tragic flaw, moral weakness, or circumstances beyond his control. It has also been seen as an action or crisis that must happen only to a blue blood, someone in higher authority and of royal birth, which also brings about catharsis and purgation. This has been the convention until Arthur Miller's *Dead of the Salesman* which negates the Aristotle's theory of tragedy of noble birth and expands the issue of tragedy universally, owing to the fact that, all men are equal in smile, pain, emotion and even at death. Therefore, tragedy should be general and not one sided, so at that point tragedy was redefined for even common man and woman as the case maybe. However, heroic display(s) in women fold has not seriously been defined, redefined or accorded any meaningful effigy, astute and acknowledgment. One could not assert when and where a woman's heroic statue starts and ends, most especially in Africa. Probably, it could be hinged on the fact that they themselves have not really considered themselves as heroes in every of their moves, better still the patriarchal society has limited them to the dungeon of fear and intimidation.

Feminism Defined

Feminist theory aim at understanding the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experiences, and advocating for the rights of women in property, marital issues, education, and voting rights, as protecting women and girls from domestic violence and sexual harassment.

In the 1970s feminism began to change women's lives. Those women with access to feminist ideas, thinking and publications mainly white middle-class women discovered and challenged the male dominance of social, political, cultural and, for our purposes, theatrical systems. In brief, feminism encouraged women towards a political understanding of how they had been either oppressively positioned, or completely left out of the 'main stream' of social, cultural and political activity. As women began to demand equal rights with men, agitating specifically on four basic issues (equal pay; equal education and opportunity; twenty-four-hour nurseries; and free contraception and abortion on demand), their protests

made use of agit-prop techniques in street demonstrations. For example, feminist protesters at the Miss World beauty contests in the late 1960s and early 1970s staged counter spectacles, by decorating their own bodies with flashing lights attached to clothing at their breasts and crotches, or parading a dummy draped in the symbols of domestic oppression, such as an apron, a stocking, and a shopping bag. This kind of early street protest is embryonic of the body-centered critique of gender representation that subsequently was to dominate feminist theatre, theory and practice in the 1980s. Meanwhile, the street theatre beginnings and theatre festivals seeded the desire among feminist practitioners for a more sustained approach to theatre-making. Consequently, feminist practitioners began to set up their own 'spaces' and companies in which they could explore women's issues in a more developed way. As mainstream playhouses, and even some of the newly formed left wing socialist companies, failed to give women an equal platform (either in the hierarchical structures of male- dominated theatre work, or as a dramatic subject), forming a company was one way for women to claim a counter-cultural 'space of their own'.

Feminists share at least some understanding of what women's oppression might mean, but they differ enormously over what could constitute women's liberation and share common characteristics as follows:

1. All versions of feminism assert that the existing relations between the sexes, in which women are subordinated to men, are unsatisfactory and ought to be changed.
2. Feminism challenges much that is taken for granted as natural, normal and desirable in our various societies.
3. Feminism consists of ideas which raise fundamental problems seeking explanation, while the whole history and future course of human society is brought into question.
4. Feminism is not simply ideas. Its point is to change the world, to transform the relations between women and men so that all people can have more chance to fulfill their whole human potential; feminism is logical, also a set of ideas which are politically practiced.
5. Feminism comprises very varied political practices but these are all aimed at changing the relations between the sexes by giving women control over their own lives; they may vary from consciousness- raising groups and struggles over the washing up, to struggles for separation from men, to organized demands for civil liberties, economic and political power; feminism is then by definition provocative
6. Feminist proposals for change always encounter resistance, although the nature and strength of this resistance is variable.
7. Feminism does not start from a detached and objective standpoint on knowledge of the relations between women and men. Even the most moderate advocates of women's rights must take the view that men have rights which are unjustly denied to women. This commitment does not mean

that feminist knowledge is not valid knowledge, but it does entail asking what we mean by knowledge, and why some forms of knowledge are seen as more valid than others. Feminism implies a radical critique of reason, science and social theory which raises serious questions about how we know what we think we know (Aston, 1995).

Aston explained three main feminist thoughts and practices. They are:

Liberal feminism: The movement can be found wherever women fight for health, work, education, legal rights, decent housing, and an improved standard of living for women in general. These struggles do not, however, seriously challenge non-feminist understandings of the causes of the inequalities between women and men. Liberal feminism acknowledges that women are widely discriminated against because of their gender, but does not identify the relations between the sexes as specific power relations. In this respect it differs both theoretically and politically from radical and Marxist forms of feminism which are both directly concerned with power relations within sexual politics.

Radical feminism: Launches an assault on the whole of male-dominated society. The conventional wisdom in western culture that women's place is in the home and at the service of men torn apart by the revelation of women as unnaturally confined and restricted by the institutions of patriarchal society. Radical feminism focused directly on women's relation to men as politically problematic. It brought sexuality and reproduction into the political arena and transformed women's political consciousness. The radical feminist strategies of small, non-hierarchical, consciousness-raising groups allow women to share their personal experiences of oppression.

Marxist feminism: This movement questioned the adequacy of Marxist theory and politics, since socialism, although it could produce improved material conditions for women, clearly did not produce women's liberation from men. But at the same time, they also reacted against what the unjustified universality of radical feminist analysis. The rise of radical feminism, for example, raised women's consciousness of the subordinate roles they were expected to play in left-wing political organizations and protest movements.

Radical and Marxist feminism are both clearly feminist in that they question every aspect of the power relations between women and men, although in different ways. Liberal feminism is very different to the extent that so much more of what now exists is taken for granted. The main argument against liberal feminists is that because they neglect the realities of male power over women, their political strategies are largely ineffective.

Nigeria's Perspective of Woman and Feminism

Odi (2014) said:

Discourse on women empowerment in Nigeria has been ongoing for decades now, and it will continue to be a topical as long as issues of female subjugation, subordination, marginalization and oppression in the Nigeria society still exist. In fact, as long as there are still voices speaking up for the empowerment of the female gender, as long as concerted effort are been made toward the realization of that course, the discourse will continue. (P. 638).

In Nigeria, women have been involved in various movements and activities in their own ways even though such movements were not identified or labeled with any specific name. At the early stages, feminism as a concept attracted negative connotations, and usually feminist women were usually associated and/or stigmatized as 'men haters' frustrated or divorced women with nothing better to do but 'cause trouble'.

Azuike (2003) explained:

Many women in Nigeria desist from carrying the label of 'feminists'. This majorly could be due to the fear of societal exclusion of anyone who declares herself/himself publicly as a feminist. Another reason is the notion exhibited by certain arms of the press to label feminism as a man-hating group of unattractive, unlovable and frustrated women (P. 9).

Feminism gained attention in Nigeria as a result of different attempts made by women to secure and sustain equal rights and opportunities for women. The prevalence of unequal power relation resulting in disproportionate distribution of rights and privileges to women has been a great issue of concern leading to different interventions by individuals and women's groups to eradicate such concept. Azuike asserts that different activities by feminist movements have assisted in inspiring women to improve their self-confidence and also help them to strive hard for the total liberation and socio-political and economic empowerment of women.

The analysis of women's roles in Nigeria's liberation struggle can be understood from the nature of the economic, social and political actions they were engaged in that period. During the pre-colonial period, Nigerian women participated actively in the private and public spheres and usually have independent access to resources. The exception to this were the women in the Northern part of the country comprising mainly of the Hausa-Fulani whose commercial activities were restricted as a result of the use of the Islamic purdah. They still created a strong impression on the socio-political landscape of the region. Some notable women asserted their rights and started their own feminist movements. Prominent example was Queen Amina of Zauzzau. A distinguished soldier, an empire builder who led campaigns within months of

becoming ruler and subdued the whole area between Zauzzau and the Niger and Benue rivers absorbing the Nupe and Kwararafa states. In 1576, she became the undisputed ruler of Zauzzau, a Hausa city in Northern Nigeria. So also is queen Idia of Benin kingdom who was the first and last woman who led a war in the entire history of Benin Empire. So also was the Women's War of 1929 (also known as the Aba Women's Riots), in which Igbo market women protested British taxation, was a notable example of women using their traditional power against colonial rulers. However, the colonialists had introduced certain rules and regulations which weakened the enjoyment of social, economic and political rights of women. Women's representation in the public sphere was very low even though women were granted the right to vote in the 1950s in the South and in the North in the 1980s.

Since the beginning of the post-colonial era, women's movements in Nigeria have organized many protests although restricted to major cities like Lagos. This period has also witnessed the multiplicity and specialization of women organizations which developed their activities around focal areas germane to women's interest. These include sexual and reproductive rights, rape, environment, domestic abuse, political marginalization, early child marriages, misapplication of the Sharia Law in some parts of the North against women's interests etc. Since Nigeria became a democratic nation, the promise of equal participation in politics for women by way of percentage has not been realized; international instruments that Nigeria is signatory to have not been domesticated, the laws that are made to protect and promote the rights of women are not adhered to and injustices against women, whether cultural or religious, are still the order of the day. There has not been the need for riots and protests as such in the past few years, so women's movements have been more of documentation, lobbying, advocacy and media relations etc.

Analysis of Heroic Display in the Two Texts

Olokodana (2014) stated:

Women in general find a patriarchal society inimical to their total existence. With a new consciousness in the wake of 16th century, feminism, and later womanism, later became an all-encompassing phenomenon stirred by the need to stop unnecessary prejudice and marginalization of women in a men dominate society. Using their wit and might couple with the power of the pen, feminist playwright all over the world have change the perception of the woman in world by capturing the strength of womanhood in their works. (P. 62)

Although some feminists, both in the academia and in the other professions, adopting a bourgeois or liberal feminist position, were prepared to argue for a greater representation of women in the theatrical on 'male stream' terms, others objected to the objectification of women in the realist tradition, and in particular, to the character based, method-acting. This was derived from the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavski,

attendant upon it. The character roles made available for women to 'get into' in this 'method' invite the actress to identify with the oppression of the female character to which she has been assigned. As feminist theatre scholar, Aston quoting Sue-Ellen Case explains the psychological construction of character, using techniques adapted from Stanislavski, placed the female actor within the range of systems that have oppressed her very representation on stage (Aston 1995).

Feminist theater theory over the last decade or so has raised important questions about the dramatic canon's composition and interpretation. It has introduced important ideas about the role of theater within a patriarchal political and social economy. It has brought analytical systems developed in feminist literary and film criticism to bear on theater texts and practices. Surprisingly, though, so far feminist theater theory has had little to say about the workings of theater itself, about how the critical engagement demanded of dramatic spectators can trigger a parallel critical engagement with the world, and especially, women's place within it.

The play text, *Queen 'Amina of Zauzzau'* by Tomoluju, portrays the spirit and strength of womanhood. This can be seen in the character of Queen Amina who did not submit herself to the domesticity of womanhood as a wife and mother, but chose to show that the strength of a woman goes beyond domestic activities. Though, the society considers a woman as a weak and a subordinate to the man, therefore should only be seen not be heard in public. This is reflected in the character of Gunuko one of the prominent warriors of Kwararafa in the play *Queen Amina of Zauzzau*, when he said:

Gunuko: That is Sarkin Kwararafa. It cannot happen to us in Gunuko
A woman, a powerless beauty whom I use to satisfy my desire,
Cannot defeat me in battle. If that happens, I am not fit to live.

Magaji: But I am told that the woman is more powerful
Than many men. She is infact, a man, not a woman (Tomoluju, 2005).

The conversation above is between the two chiefs and warriors of Kwararafa that reaffirms man's dominant position within the community or society. Tomoluju uses the history of Queen Amina, a great woman who fought tirelessly to protect her kingdom and its people to demonstrate the prowess deposited in a woman as an epitomized effigy. However, despite her status as a Queen, her great achievements remain hidden in the annals of history because she is a woman and unmarried, which the society generally frowns at in all ramifications.

Amina: Conquest...and dreams upon my womanhood. Enemies.
Yet they want my hand in marriage. Am I not the woman?
I offer my whole body in bouts of blood. But when the act is done,
The story is not told...because I am more than woman. (*Giggles.*)

Blood and Flesh (Tomoluju, 2005).

Amina as warrior and a fearless fighter whose passion is to rekindle the strength in womanhood is reflected in her utterances above. One could see how passionate Amina was, so also aggrieved and pained, as she expresses her dismay against the male folds who refused bluntly to recognize and accord her the heroic statues she deserved. But rather than bequeathing her the honor of heroism, she was berated and wants her hand in marriage so as to relegate her to a 'mere' house wife and second fiddle that she supposedly be, by their presumptions. Ben Tomoluju gives us a different opinion with the story of Queen Amina from the feminist angle and her heroic display as woman. In Amina's actions, the playwright portrayed the woman as a strong leader, a selfless heroine, distinguished soldier and empire builder who led campaigns within months of becoming ruler and subdued the whole areas between Zauzzau, the Niger and Benue rivers absorbing the Nupe and Kwararafa states. The issue of heroism x-rays a feminine view that contrasts the contemporary domesticity and the legendary heroic display in a battle of self-actualization, thereby giving the woman an opportunity to synthesize her abilities.

While in Otun Rasheed's *The Gods Are Still Not To Blame*, the woman is looked upon in a derogatory manner. Olori Ademorin bears burden of the entire saga; yet, her role is mentioned in relation to detrimental actions, or unspeakable act. Even though the play justifies the opinion that man is the architect of his own misfortune. Rasheed highlights the cultural challenge women face in the society. Yerima (2008) reiterated:

The female counterpart was included in most of the stories, as the docile wife, the priced gift or enticed stupid woman who was easily fooled by the attractive characteristics which were often attributed to the male characters within the environment, content and context of the drama. Even within the animal kingdom, it was the male tortoise, the male fox or the male spider, not the female one that always outsmarted the other animals including the listener of the stories. (P. 59).

Olori Ademorin is the wife of Oba Adedoyin, who had a child (Stephen) and was asked to be sacrificed to the god believing that he kill his father and in turn marry his mother. Instead, Stephen was thrown abroad and was nurtured by Olori Ademorin's sister. Stephen and Adetunde are Olori Ademorin's children. Olori Ademorin refuses to be inherited by her late husband's brothers, but fell in love with a young man (Stephen) and the society frowns at the relationship even before it was discovered that the man is her son, which out rightly in African or Nigerian society is also an abominable act. This is reflected in the conversation between Adetunde and Olori Ademorin below, in Otun Rasheed's play *The gods are still not to blame*, which is mother and son conversation:

Adetunde: Please, think about this. The shame!

- Olori Ademorin:** Think about what? Why can't you reason?
I expect you at this time to be with me and understand.
- Adetunde:** I am not saying you should not move on with your life
But please mum, not with this. I am not even sure this guy
is older than me. For God's sake, what spell has he over you?
- Olori Ademorin:** Love!
- Adetunde:** What are you saying mum?
- Olori Ademorin:** Exactly, what you've just heard. Love compassion and happiness.
Does it matter to you? (Otun, 2011)

Olori Ademorin suffers the pain of losing her infant child due to a prophecy that says he (the child) will kill his father and marry his mother. She passed through widowhood rites and still ended up fulfilling the prophecy by marrying her own son unknowingly. What exactly is more devastating and dehumanizing than this act, when one went through pregnancy for nine months, pain of child delivery and then lost the child to one 'stupid' prophecy in the name of peace for the community, as if that was not enough, the same prophecy that was avoided or prevented still came to past. Then, a quick question runs in the minds, that, how does it feel for a woman to sleep with his son and even bore children by him, not one not two but four, still she is not the hero of the play. The portrayal of woman by the playwright as not a tragic hero, as well as not according to her proper place rather than pity is the concern of this paper. Unlike Queen Amina who emerges as a triumphant hero till her death but still besmirched and dehumanized for being a woman. For instants, check almost Nigeria monuments, schools, roads, stadia and even our currency, hardly will you see anyone named after a woman, and then a quick question comes up. What sacrifices or appeasement, will the women folds offer or to what God or gods, for them to be accord their rightful position of heroism.

Militating Factors against Women Heroism in Nigeria

Olokodana (2014) observed:

The polarization, segregation and prejudice against the feminine signal an unconscious meaning and conception of femininity. The root hinged on three factors, the first being the psychological construct, the sociological definition, and biological physiognomy of the female gender. The biological makeup of women over the years have limitlessly endanger women to several criticism thereby emphatically restricted their performative roles in the society and the world at large and thus make them venerable. The sociological is an offshoot of cultural beliefs and practice and takes on the role of preserving the antiquated heritage. The biological and sociological produce in the

unconscious, a psychological suppressant in women as 'less superior' or 'non-significant other' and it produces in the male, a psychological ego-booster reducing the status quo of women to ignorable position (P. 61).

Considering Olokodana assertion, one will agree that there are lots of factors militating against Nigerian women in the fight for equality in scheme of things and even the accordance of heroism, the cultural beliefs, traditional ethos, and customary placement of the woman folds. However, the culture and tradition of many African societies did not give room for/to woman on certain things less it becomes taboo. For instance, in the Igbo culture of the south eastern Nigeria, women have no right to inheritance. Women have been subjugated and disempowered by obnoxious practices, debarring them from self-expression and freedom in the society.

Ugwu (2014) posited:

The dehumanization bestowed on the female folks in Nigeria is strong that even the educated and enlightened woman suffers almost the same fate with the other. No wonder Alubo et al asserts that 'irrespective of class, women in Nigeria as a category are disadvantaged and subjugated. This subordinate position...gives rise to most of the health problems that women encounter (P. 379).

He reiterated:

Ezenwanabe has join her force with other female playwright to present on stage the marginalization and dehumanization the female folks in Nigeria are daily made to throb with, in their agitation against gender equality. The representation of the female character in Nigeria plays and theatre by foremost or first generation of male playwrights has been handled with contempt (P. 379).

The following can be considered as factors militating against women's heroism:

1. **Patriarchy:** This involves deliberate domination of men in the society thereby suppressing the women. Male supremacy inherent in traditional and religious beliefs affects women's heroism.
2. **Cultural Practices:** Obnoxious cultural practices, such as widowhood, purdah system, wife inheritance, female genital mutilation etc. leads to deprivation and unequal rights in all aspects of the society.
3. **Dehumanizing Treatment:** Practices such as domestic violence, rape, and marginalization of women in spheres of public life can make women inactive, loose self-confidence and also silent in both private and public domain.
4. **Unequal Rights:** Women are considered subordinate to the men and are not allowed to explore their full potentials. Women are made to see that their full potentials is in carrying out household

chores, which often leaves them with little or no time for self-development and therefore considered a weaker sex.

5. **Traditional Law:** it's a common practice in the society that women are hardly recognized as heads of family. The men are recognized by customary law as head of family. A man is regarded the owner of family land and other properties. A woman is disregarded in terms of ownership and inheritance. It's only the male who can inherit landed properties and other family generating functions.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusively, it is germane to note that, as women, most especially African women need to define and redefine their stand in the area of feminism or womanism, considering some factors that are though antiquated but still hold sway in many societies in Africa. Such factors as culture and traditions, customs and norms, and other hidden or unwritten rules that strongly and vehemently disregard the woman as equal to the man in Africa. Yerima (2008) asserts that in order to control society, man created, invented and forced laws which made him not only the master of his female counterpart, but the whole environment. This meant that men's dominance or superiority was an unwritten law which constantly was put in man's subconscious mind. However, there are strong indications that things are gradually changing in many quarters and men are also beginning to recognize the fact that women also have right to certain things which they have been denied ever since. Nonetheless, that right to outright equality of men and women sound good and sweet but its realization is very slim most especially in Africa, so it is pertinent for the African women to look inward and re-strategize considering their natural and social environment, if not the outright to equality might be a mere dream and fantasy. Yerima (2008) said:

The 'masculine tradition canon' has always dominated the Africa consciousness concerning beliefs and existence. The culture, religion, the language, the names, the types of vocation, even the biological and psychological structure of human as determined by the environment and nature, have always re-emphasized the dominance of the male over his female counterpart. The myth, folklore and stories which sharpened man's attempt to understand how the world was created, who created it, and human basic mission in life had a domineering character, the figure, as the hero and the superman constantly involved in the unending quest to rule the world. (P. 59)

Therefore, it is also high time for the men and the society at large to also look at the area of heroic status quo of women, whenever a great feat is achieved by them (women), denying women the heroic statue could amount to barbaric and inhumane treatment and behaviour.

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