

that is not only new but has the capacity to transform human understanding. Substantial questions were raised in the early 1970s and 1980s about the theories and practices of the visual arts and whether studio inquiry could feasibly be considered to be part of the university research community. Artists who work in university also teach, but the question is: Do they do research? Artistic research is also seen as “practice-based research” and can take form when creative works are considered both the research and the object of research itself. Art-based research was first formally cited around the mid of 1990s (Sullivan, 2010). Art-based educational inquiry describes and interprets phenomena whereby seeing or sensing is the basis for compiling thematic patterns of evidence from which meaning is made vivid. It is based on artistic practices, methods and is artistic. It aims to enhance knowledge and understanding with presentation of the arts. In artistic research, perhaps more so than other disciplines, intuition is utilized as a method to identify a wide range of new and unexpected productive modalities.

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1.

THE CONTEMPORARY WOMAN IN A CONSERVATIVE CULTURE: JULIE OKOH'S *OUR WIFE FOREVER* TO THE RESCUE

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Introduction

Women related literature abound. Awareness both by women and men who sympathise with the course of women upliftment is on the rise. The notion of the woman as a ‘second class citizen’ is gradually becoming a thing of the past occasioned by the ever increasing campaigns to better the lot of women and put them on the same pedestal, side by side with their male companions in Nigeria, Africa, and the entire world. Nowadays there have been these clichés like ‘*what a man can do, a woman can do better*’, ‘*beside a successful man is the woman*’ and no longer ‘*behind a successful man is the woman*’ etc. The word ‘behind’ is now looked upon as derogatory due to the current debates and demands for equality; “side by side” is now a point of emphasis to uplift the status of women.

All such arguments and concessions are coming on the heels of the agitation that, discriminatory practices against women be discarded to enable women participate without encumbrances in cultural and political activities. Lewu (2015:563) identifies some of the discriminatory practices against women to include the ‘home, school, work and... unequal feeding practices to cultural norms...’ that prevent the women from being on the same page with their male counterparts. As part of discriminatory practices against women Lewu points out that among the *Lelna* ethnic group of *Zuru* Local government area of Kebbi State, women are not allowed in ‘their menstrual period, to cook for men, to drink from the same source with their husbands’ and such other practices (2015:564). These and many other such issues and practices weigh women down and prevent them from feeling free to mix, interact and contribute meaningfully to the growth and development of their various societies. The situation presently is fast changing particularly as a result of the phenomenon termed globalization. This is a situation where people and events are mirrored through the tube and internet for the mutual benefit of all. This interface has become a turning point in the history of the media, which has offered the framework for the actualisation of the exchange of ideas in contemporary times.

Culture: An X-ray

It has become very popular that culture is the total way of life of a group of people, which includes a combination of language, love, eating habits, celebrations, inhibitions, marriage, religion/beliefs and many more. The word group refers to a community or society and it varies from one place to another. It shows that because of the differences in such communities or societies these practices also differ. Definitely, there is a legion but no particular one has been completely singled out and accepted. Many of them point out certain key elements that are common and can be observed in the interaction of people at various levels.

Perhaps, this definition of culture is more practical and popular in the sociological parlance: "Culture is defined as the complex whole of man's acquisition of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, custom, technology, etc., which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation" (E. B. Taylor in Otite & Ogionwo, 1994: 44). Culture therefore, remains a walking question mark with its diverse identities in different societies and communities around Africa and the entire universe. That is to say that what is acceptable in community 'A' may not be acceptable in community 'B' in the same manner.

Tile (2015:11) observes that, "culture is both static and dynamic" adding that: "... Culture taken in its widest ethnographic sense refers to all that we do by ourselves and all that others do for us in conformity with our indigenous requirements and circumstances towards the perfection of our society." Tile points out that those static elements of culture are those that last very long without being affected by the changing environment citing the example of language. He maintains that those aspects of culture that change with time include 'mode of dressing, hair style, and eating habits...'

Furthermore, Geertz in Kottak (2000:62) looks at culture as, "control mechanisms- plans, recipes, rules, constructions, what computer engineers call programs for the governing of behaviours". In other words, Geertz is simply saying that culture is a set of guiding principles for a particular group of people that ensures harmony and cordial relationship. It therefore, goes back to the earlier point established about culture as a way of life of a group of people in a society. When these rules are strictly adhered to, peace becomes the order of the day- what is desired by all peoples and societies around the universe. The prescriptions of culture all over the world are such that guide behaviour within the ambit of the territorial or geographical situation of a community concerned. These prescriptions Tile (2015), observes are created and carried by the same members of a society and handed down from one generation to another. As Tile however, observed earlier, while some aspects of culture change with time others remain static, it is believed that in the era of globalization many of these changes that have occurred have affected our psyche.

The Contemporary Woman

The New Lexicon Contemporary Encyclopaedic Dictionary defines *contemporary* as "belonging to the same time (pop) modern..." (211) which can be interpreted at present times (Lorimer, (Ed) 1995:211). Present times because we are looking at the entire world as one global village where information about happenings in the village are distributed simultaneously through the internet and digital television, information communication technology. What therefore, happens elsewhere is transmitted through the same information communication technology and this gives the impression that such an event is taking place at the backyard, around and almost within the same vicinity. There is therefore, that interface and exchange of ideas as they are imbibed and practised as fashion in terms of clothe designs and other modes of behaviour.

The woman in this digital era seems to be more modernized- a breakaway from those conservative cultural practices that tend to place more restrictions on her behaviour as well as manner of doing things generally. This is so because the contemporary times have offered so much, both to the woman and the man as well. We have education which has changed a lot of behaviour of the past to what is happening globally; there is also the religious angle which has also contributed immensely to behavioural change to modern practices. These have offered very strong opposition to cultural practices that are defined by these forces as barbaric. For instance, in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria,

... The oldest woman in a gathering cannot be served a drink before the youngest boy. Thus a woman cannot be given recognition as the oldest person in a community... the man that does not grow beards on his chin; he is looked upon as a 'wizard, who has to be buried in the evil forest (Ayakoroma, 2015: 15-16).

These are some of the issues that the contemporary woman doesn't seem to be at home with. However, Ayakoroma notes that sometimes the woman of today could be the architect of her fate citing also the case of 'a pastor's wife who could dump her 8-month-old baby and go away from her matrimonial home...' (Ayakoroma, 2015:18). How else can one describe this behaviour of a modern or contemporary woman, a pastor's wife at that, to exhibit this kind of abominable action, as if she didn't go through labour pains? This therefore, is a mix-grill that houses 'the good, the bad and the ugly' put together. Contemporariness and/or modernism is therefore a double edged sword even though it is expected that its advantages are more in number than its disadvantages.

Synopsis of *Our Wife Forever*

Events in *Our Wife Forever* revolve around *Victoria*, a widow, who is harassed by her brother-in-law *Thomas* for inheritance. *Victoria* is confronted with barbaric, superstitions and dehumanising practices disguised as customary funeral rights, following the death of her husband. She is compelled to perform a series of inhuman rituals like shaving her hair, sitting on a mat on the hard ground throughout a specified period, demobilisation, her accompaniment by her late husband's paternal uncle to the evil forest, the discarding of all the things she used during the forty day funeral period and most barbaric of all, drinking some water used in bathing her late husband's corpse. With extreme revulsion, she rejects the drinking of such water used in bathing her late husband's corpse and her action is considered an abomination. As a consequence of this so called abominable act, herself and her children are denied certain privileges in the community. She is subjugated and oppressed by *Thomas* who represents tradition and her late husband's custom stricken people. *Thomas* takes away his entire brother's property and leaves *Victoria* alone with nothing. Even the house *Victoria* built with her late husband is threatened and the matter goes to court for adjudication.

In the midst of the oppression and dehumanization however, she finds solace in the ever-available kindness, care, love, and encouragement from *Felix*, her late husband's bosom friend. *Thomas* makes several attempts including professing love to *Victoria* in a bid to inherit her and her late husband's property claiming his actions are in line with their customs and tradition. *Felix* tries to reason him out of his unenlightened ideas but these attempts fall on deaf ears. *Thomas* brands him (*Felix*) as an "opportunist" instead and warns him to stay away from *Victoria*. Despite *Thomas'* attempts to subdue *Victoria*, she remains resolutely impenetrable. Having tried and failed, *Thomas* resorts to filing a case in court against *Victoria* concerning the inheritance of her husband's property. With the help of *Felix*, *Victoria* wins the case which gives her total liberation and

emancipation from the shackles of *Thomas* and his deadly customs. *Felix* professes and proposes to *Victoria*, and with the consent of her children, she accepts to marry thus marking the revival of complete happiness, something she lost since the demise of her husband, *Hector*.

The Contemporary Woman in *Our Wife Forever*

Victoria is a modern woman in Julie Okoh's *Our Wife Forever*. She is well schooled and perhaps very religious too. In phase I of the play, when *Felix* visits her he asks:

Felix: Wait a minute! You are wearing *Hector's* clothes?

Victoria: Yes I am. By his death I have stepped into his shoes as the head of this family. So also I've stepped into his clothes for comfort and support (P. 15).

To *Felix*, it is surprising that *Victoria* is wearing *Hector's*, her late husband's clothes. In modern times, this is possible and there are no qualms attached especially in a fashionable period where men's dresses are now unisex. Before now, this was abominable, first for women to wear men's clothes and second a dead man's clothes at that. *Victoria* however, finds comfort in her husband's clothes as well as support pointing to the fact that the spirit of her late husband still abides.

Talking about the traditional ritual rites the widow has to go through at the funeral makes one sick. *Victoria* herself describes these as horrible. She recounts:

Victoria: I didn't really mind shaving my hair. Though, I could hardly control the tears that were streaming down my face, some women made it their duty to see that I cried at dawn everyday... I was made to sit on a mat on the hard ground throughout the period...

Moreover, hands were crossed, tied in front of me... I couldn't use them for anything... if I had an itch in any part of my body; I called on someone to help me scratch the itching spot... At the end of the forty days' burial rites, in the middle of the night, around 2am, I was accompanied by his paternal uncle to the evil forest.

Felix: For what?

Victoria: To throw away all the things I had used during the forty days' funeral period, including clothes, mat, dishes and so on. If you saw me that night, I was terrified as we moved through those narrow bush paths...

Felix: You don't mean it.

Victoria: I mean every word of it. It was only after then that I was allowed to take my bath for the first time since his demise (P. 21-22).

These are some of the humiliating rituals the woman has to go through at the death of her husband. Most times, this occurs because members of the conservative tradition believe and accuse the woman of killing her husband, but for goodness sake which woman wants her husband dead under normal circumstances? Records hardly exist where, if the wife dies first, the man is subjected to any percentage of what the woman passes through in the event of her husband's death. However, this woman, *Victoria*, an epitome of contemporary times and dynamic norms devises ways of taking care of herself in the face of these health challenging, so called customary funeral rites. For instance, she objected to taking 'meals from disused dishes,' as *Felix* asks her:

Felix: Did you really fulfil all those expectations?

Victoria: Partially, it is true I didn't take my bath for forty days. However, each day before dawn I would quickly brush my teeth, wash my face and clean up my private parts before they wake up (P.23).

Accordingly, the oath taking day came and she was taken to the room where the corpse of her husband, *Hector* was, stripped naked, she agreed to swear that she had no hand in her husband's death. After the oath, a wet towel was used in scrubbing *Hector*'s body and after that some liquid was squeezed into a bowl and given her to drink and she reacted thus:

Victoria: I was overwhelmed with shock and disbelief. I didn't know when I knocked down the bowl of water and fled the room (P.23).

And the reason for this action is to prove her innocence. Now who says if you drink that kind of concoction, man or woman, you will not be sick? In addition, how many times have men been subjected to this unwholesome treatment at the death of their wives? This is unhygienic no more no less. *Victoria*'s courage to pull down the bowl housing such unclean water is 'salutable'. She asks "how could I have caused his kidney failure?" (P. 24).

Furthermore, the archaic and conservative nature of tradition gives *Hector*'s people the 'right' to inherit his property and so they empty that house and leave *Victoria* with the empty space. As if this is not biting enough, *Thomas* who represents *Hector*'s people demands for the house itself, but, the court returns the house to *Victoria* and her children. To add insult to injury, *Thomas* wants to inherit *Victoria* claiming customs prescribe so. He intimidates her as much as his wits can lead him. At one of such encounters this argument ensues:

Thomas: (*kicking Felix's buttocks from behind, THOMAS' cap drops down, rolls to a distance before stopping.*) What's going on here?

Felix: What did you do that for, hitting me on my buttocks?

Thomas: Shut up your dirty mouth.

Felix: That's not gentlemanly at all!

Thomas: Is it gentlemanly of you to sneak in here to meddle with my intentions?

Felix: I don't know what your intentions are, or how I have meddled with them (P, 27-28).

One wonders whether the customs prescribe aggression if you want a woman. At some other instance *Thomas* comes into *Victoria*'s house with accusations thus:

Thomas: But I saw him over you. What were you doing with him on the floor? Answer me quickly.

Victoria: We were doing something on the floor?

Thomas: Yes on the floor of your living room! Don't you have any shame at all? People will hear this.

Felix: Blackmail! That's pure blackmail! (P, 30).

This is intimidation enough but *Victoria* calmly shows him the door to use to go and narrate to people the 'abominable'. *Thomas* uses the same approach of intimidation on all matters to milk *Victoria* of perceived wealth of his brother, late *Hector*. Having failed in all his attempts to seduce *Victoria*, *Thomas* thinks if he asks her to pay back the bride price which the family paid to marry her she will submit in the following conversation:

Victoria: What gave you the privilege to have control over me?

Thomas: As long as you continue to answer Imodu, you are our wife.

Victoria: If it will make you feel better, I'll change to my maiden name.

Thomas: Will you also pay back the bride price paid on you?

Victoria: Fine! How much was it? Nothing to cause me sleepless nights!

Thomas: Don't forget to include the interest and inflation variations. You were married for about twelve years... (P. 36-37).

Victoria refuses to be intimidated by all these antics because she can afford it since she was not totally dependent on her late husband. She insists that she cannot be inherited like an immobile and static property and that she deserves and possesses the right and conscience to decide what she wants. She refuses to appear before the council of elders because according to her "the council is made up of men and they are all biased against women" (P, 52). She asserts further that the old women in the council are dormant 'all they do is concur with the men in whatever they decide' (P, 52).

Conclusion

Victoria Imodu, the major character in Julie Okoh's *Our Wife Forever* should serve as a source of inspiration for other women who may find themselves in similar situations. Death is inevitable and as Yashi, (1998:5) notes, it is a debt each and every human being owes God. At the appropriate time everybody would pay, that is, return to God. If *Victoria* survives all forms of intimidation via the crude and conservative cultural practices others can take a cue from her courage. Note should be taken of the fact that in all her tribulations and provocations she exerts firm control of her emotions and so nowhere is it reported that she is nasty or insulting. This one believes, is as a result of her interaction with modern trends of events in form of Western education and of course religious teachings, which combine to form a balanced contemporary woman.

In modern health prevention, we are told of the existence of microorganisms that are harmful to our health when *Victoria* remembers this and refuses to drink the water with which her husband's corpse is washed. She uses her exposure via education to tell *Thomas* off with his conservative and selfish traditions. She also finds time between her incarceration to brush her mouth and also wash her private parts as against the wishes of the so called tradition. In all of these protests and refusals to participate in decadent customs, there is no tragic confrontation. She employs the use of dialogue to overcome static/rigid aspects of her husband's tradition. *Victoria* is indeed a character that symbolises a great woman created by Julie Okoh, juxtaposed with ancient conservative customs and given her victory as the character's name implies, in the face of demeaning, domineering and decadent cultural prescriptions and practices.

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