

FEMINIST ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL ORDER IN NIGERIAN DRAMA

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Abstract

In patriarchal societies such as Nigeria, men are believed to promulgate most intimate-partner and domestic violence on women. The patriarchate is principal. However, while the emasculation of women may not be a common trait in all men, the former's complicity in instituting masculine hegemony cannot be gainsaid. In presenting a comparative examination of women's panacea for perceived male aggression against them in two male-authored plays – Emeka Nwaeze's *the Dragon's Funeral* and J.P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* – this study interrogates the image-implication of "women abscondment" and "sex strike" in securing social change in *The Wives' Revolt*. Through qualitative analysis of the texts under study, this researcher observes that emphasis on coition and domestic chores as a woman's sole bargaining power dilutes her intellectual worth as well as delineates her as a docile sex toy. This trend focalises the contributory role of Nigerian feminist drama in entrenching masculine hegemony. Comparatively therefore, the heroines in *The Wives' Revolt* do not enhance women's image as much as the female activists in *The Dragon's Funeral* who plan, engage in and execute feats that rescue the womenfolk from mass exploitation.

Key Words: Feminism, Social Order, Drama, Activism

Introduction

The origin of feminism dates back to the western antiquities. Ranging from the mythical figures such as "Liliath, to the legendary fighting Amazons of Greece and ancient Dahomey, and to classical plays like Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*...", the quest for gender equity has remained age-long (Shaka and Uchendu 1). Feminism has acquired diverse dimensions across the ages. Erected on the planks of philosophical and political awareness, the strands of feminist consciousness were observable well-before the Women's Movement began in the 20th century. The domestic patriarchal regime is pillared on household endeavour as the sole spot of women's vocation wherein they are exploited on double account – labour and sex. In the public space, women are tucked into pejorative aspects of the labour force and, consequently, suffer discriminations within the structures of paid services. Any attempt to rebel against this status quo – either in the public or private patriarchy – heralded what would later harden into the feminist movement.

In Nigeria, feminism has remained a subject that generates heated debates. From mere domestic arguments, the issue has garnered global attention and co-opted more scholar-discussants. Consequently, literary writers and texts have been grouped according to their degrees of sympathy towards women and female characters, respectively. Accordingly, such terms as 'feminist drama', 'feminist playwright' and 'feminist theatre' have become the varying auspices under which pro-women plays and performances exist. In spite of the seeming multi-focal thrust of the differing perspectives on gender equality, their goal is to scrutinize and resolve the problems that plague the female folk in contemporary times.

The problems of women in Nigeria derive impetus mainly from patriarchy and colonialism. Prior to colonial contact, the traditional role of women granted them considerable relevance in the distribution of resources. Omonubi-McDonnell (2003) remarks that,

Colonialism was a disengaging experience that obliterated and stifled the voice of women. The colonial strategy of circuitous control created a gender-oriented executive establishment that endures in spite of decolonization. The British government's socio-economic approaches that handicapped women and the political arrangement that empowered men to rule women are continually blamed for the current disadvantaged status of women in Nigeria. Both strategies robbed women of their traditional authority (100).

Drawing necessarily from the foregoing, it is apparent that colonialism entrenched patriarchy and its attendant emasculation of women in Nigeria. In a patriarchate, man is empowered to dominate woman who is perceived to be physically weaker than him. This explains why feminists consistently tackle the patriarchal system.

Although Nigeria operates both statutory and customary laws, feminists consensually affirm that discriminatory legislations against "...women are found mostly in the various systems of customary laws which include... indigenous cultural traditions and religious laws" (Okoh, 2002:42). The unwritten codes of the patriarchal system oppress women on many fronts. For example, at birth, the male child is welcomed with festivities while her female counterpart is rather received with a strange blend of indifference and resignation to fate.

The new mother (becomes) distraught with anxiety over the possibility of being replaced with a new wife while her husband, especially one who has been looking for a male child, may resort to the bottle, inebriating (himself) to forget (his) disappointment, anger and even sorrow" (Okoh, 2003:43).

The realities above are designed to not only reinforce the total domination of woman but also erode in her a sense of importance, beginning from birth. Millet (2007) blames this trend on sexual politics. World over, "sexual politics obtains consent through the socialization of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role and status" (P. 339). Evidently, the socialization process is promulgated by man. He determines its nature, structure and modes of operation: conferring an inferior status on the feminine and placing the masculine on a sky-high altitude.

Ezeigbo (1996) illustrates the foregoing when she discusses the issue of 'titlemania' – the craze for titles – in Nigeria. In her book, *Gender Issues in Nigeria: A Feminine Perspective*, she berates the extent to which an average Nigerian man detests the title, 'Mr'. According to her,

The love for titles has reduced some Nigerians to sometimes prefixing their professional designations to their names. Hence such titles which people outside this country would view as absurd: Engineer X, Accountant Y, Architect Z and Surveyor X (Ezeigbo, *Gender Issues*, 1996:39).

It is instructive to note that majority of men who desperately seek titles pay huge sums of money to procure them. Hence, their insistence on being addressed 'properly' as 'Chief' or other appellations. Different titles serve them ostentatious purposes, unlike the appellation, 'Mr' which has become all-comers' title.

Ironically however, women are obsessed with the title, 'Mrs'. Even when a woman has worked hard enough to earn a PhD or MBBS, she rather would jettison the title of 'Dr' she rightfully deserves for 'Mrs'. The point being made here is that,

The average Nigerian believes marriage is the greatest status any woman can acquire. So the title 'Mrs' or its equivalent in our ethnic languages becomes the only worthy one she needs aspire to. How unfortunate! (Ezeigbo, *Gender Issues*, 1996:41).

It is indeed unfortunate that, unlike his female counterpart,

many a Nigerian male is antipathetic to the title 'Mr' – a corollary of 'Mrs' – and those who have the means would do anything to find a substitute for it. Some have adopted the title 'prince', although they are not blue-blooded. Others have been knighted (without displaying any acts of 'chivalry') and subsequently procured the title, 'Sir'. It's incredible! (Ezeigbo *Gender Issues*, 1996:41).

Indeed, the average Nigerian woman has been successfully intimidated to be an appendage of a man. Her individuality is tucked into her father or husband in the family.

It is against the foregoing background that this study analyzes the issue of feminism, from a literary viewpoint. Bearing in mind that literature is a duplicate of the society, this researcher examines women's strategies of attaining social order, relying on the primary texts for the study – Emeka Nwabueze's *the Dragon's Funeral* and J. P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* – as models. Before the analysis however, we shall consider the conceptual meanings Feminism of Social Order.

Feminism and Social Order: Towards a Theoretical Framework

The primary texts chosen for this study shall be subjected to a feminist scrutiny, using Akachi Ezeigbo's (2012) feminist theory called "Snail-Sense Feminism." An African derivative of western feminism, the Snail-Sense Feminism holds that women should behave like the snail which does not confront any obstacle but negotiates its way out. Akin to Obioma Nnaemeka's (Nego (Negotiation)-Feminism, Ezeigbo's Snail-Sense feminism urges women not to see virtues they share with the snail – wisdom, sensitivity, resilience and doggedness or determination –

“as a weakness... rather they should be seen as a way of strategizing to complement the man and join forces with him to develop the society for the benefit of all.” (Ezeigbo, *Snail-Sense*, 2012:29; my emphasis).

The Snail-Sense Feminism, a theory that emphasizes individualism and complementarity of the sexes, states that,

The individual must empower herself before she can empower others. She must stand before she can help other people stand. The pursuit of individual success and development is central to Snail-Sense Feminism. The woman should not just accommodate others, but ensure that she achieves recognition for herself because self-preservation and self-actualization are crucial to a woman's success in life. And if she succeeds, the success of the family or the community follows naturally (Ezeigbo, *Snail-Sense*, 2012:35).

Apparently, individualism – an aspect of western feminism – and complementarity – a concept in African Womanism – have combined to produce what Ezeigbo refers to as ‘Situating Feminism’. The primary texts shall therefore be analysed to determine the extent to which the ideas of feminism contained therein cohere with the Snail-Sense Feminism Vis-à-vis Social Order.

On Social Order, this study favours Parson's theory over Hobbes'. Unlike Thomas Hobbes' theory which emphasises social contract and people's restraint from crime as a result of fears, Parson's serves the purpose of this work. Citing Parson, Haralambos and Holborn note that his theory projects value consensus and “mutual advantage and peaceful cooperation rather than mutual hostility” as the basis of Social Order (39). From a feminist purview therefore, this study examines the strategies adopted by women in the primary texts to achieve social order. Emphasis is on how ‘mutual advantage’ and ‘peaceful cooperation’ are integrated in the women's strategies of achieving social order ‘for the benefit of all’.

Synopses of *The Wives' Revolt* and *The Dragon's Funeral*

The Wives' Revolt tells the tale of conflict arising from the resource sharing formula of the Erhuwaren people. The money given to them by an oil company that operates in their community was shared by men who allotted the highest percentage to themselves, reserving a little portion for the women and youths. In protest against the sharing formula, the women of Erhuwaren abscond from their homes, leaving their families behind. Unable to cope with domestic chores, the men re-visit the sharing formula and their wives return.

The Dragon's Funeral presents the story of Osioma Ngwa women who reject the colonial masters' imposition of taxation on them. Unlike the men who resort to obeying the colonial master after a futile resistance, the women strategise and execute a coordinated protest to resist the taxation policy. As a result, the colonial authorities back down on the plan.

A Feminist Scrutiny of *The Wives' Revolt* and *The Dragon's Funeral*

The majority view of scholars upholds J. P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* as a feminist drama. In his Spivakian deconstruction of the play for instance, Binebai (2015) describes it as “a good example of a feminist drama by a male writer in post-colonial Africa that deletes the silent and unspeakable space of the women” (215). Undoubtedly, the play empowers women to speak up and seek equality with men. The major concern of this study, however, is to investigate the methods adopted by women in the play in achieving social order, in relation to the image-implication of such strategies.

According to Koko, the female arrowhead in the play, “The law you (the men) have passed is bad, unfair and discriminatory, being directed against women because of our stand. We will not accept it” (Clark, 1991:10). As a consequence, she encourages her husband, Okoro, to “eat against the hungry days ahead” (Clark, 1991:24). Koko's eventual starvation of her husband and children and the abandonment of her home, are her methods of challenging the unfair sharing formula developed by the men.

Evidently, these strategies constitute an abdication of her responsibilities in marriage. Quite critical here is that these extreme measures defy the Snail-Sense feminist theory which emphasises women empowerment and accommodation: “a woman must empower herself before she can empower others” as much as she should accommodate others and ensure that she achieves self-recognition (Ezeigbo, *Snail-Sense*, 2012:35). Juxtaposing Snail-Sensitive principles with Koko's actions reveals that her strategies prohibit accommodation and the

positive empowerment of women. Her path to gender emancipation is capable of indoctrinating unsuspecting young girls and women to abscond their marriages, upon the slightest provocation. One, indeed, wonders why a mother would abscond from her home, unmindful of the condition of her children who committed no known offence against her.

Koko's brand of feminism is built on bitterness, rancor and acrimony. She propagates and celebrates women who view every man as a potential enemy as well as valorizes the downfall of marriages. Her abdication of oath-based matrimonial responsibilities characteristic of decent marriages, portrays women who tread the path of peace and reconciliation in nuptial unions as timid, weak and completely brainwashed by the prevailing patriarchal system. By leading women to part with their families, Koko can be safely described as a woman who is intolerant of any marital hiccup; a preacher of separation and divorce; and a manipulator who attributes bravery to women that publicly bash their husbands at the slightest marriage slip.

The image-implication of Koko's strategy of punishing men through women's exodus from Erhuwaren, is manifold. Firstly, it portrays women as people whose sole essence ends in domestic chores and the bedroom. This is because Koko is not empowered with any specific skill or training; she offers no unique service which the Erhuwaren community would continue to seek, in her absence. Hence, her resort to biological endowments. Expectedly, Okoro challenges her, thus:

Okoro: But what other thing can (women) do? Ban us from your beds? That won't work either, for we'll only invite the women on the road into town by popular demand... (Clark, 1991:11).

Without holding brief for Okoro who is swollen with masculine hegemony, this researcher emphasises that, while the emasculation of women may not be a common trait in all men, the former's complicity in instituting masculine hegemony cannot be gainsaid. By fleeing to the disease-stricken Eyara, women in the play have proven to be unable to withstand their male counterpart in any intellectual debate. Abscondment is not only un-African but also cowardly and extremely radical. Fleeing from Erhuwaren to Eyara, instead of staying back to make a case against perceived injustice against them, is the women's tacit concession of hegemony to men. It would have been more courageous to remain in Erhuwaren and form women leagues that can spearhead the issues affecting women, within established social structures. All these would have been possible if Koko was empowered and could thus empower other women. In the absence of a refined leader who should refine others, she leads her team to an aggressive revolt.

Against the background of Snail-Sense feminism therefore, women in *The Wives' Revolt* are too radical, confrontational and reactionary to be termed feminists. More so, the absence of any time-specific feminist goals makes Koko and her associates reactionary agents. The women of Erhuwaren do not clamour for the empowerment of women or the eradication of extant sexist policies but only react against emergent regulations that directly affect them. In addition, they fail to form a league – a platform – to negotiate their ways out of their challenges.

Snail-sensitivity holds that women should strategize on "how to complement the man and join forces with him to develop the society for the benefit of all" (Ezeigbo, *Gender Issues*, 2012:29). In *The Wives' Revolt* however, the wives in Erhuwaren engage in mass exodus to achieve their personal benefits. Their protest lacks altruism. Worse still, they make no attempt to complement the effort of men to develop the society for the benefit of all. They rather fight exclusively for their rights in the manner of a pressure group. This drift has reduced feminism in Nigeria to a women's affair, devoid of any benefit for the society at large. As a result, many men view the feminist struggle as selfish and anti-men.

Corroborating this view, Obafemi (2012) states as follows:

I would like to take off with a factual statement that feminism as an active ideological preoccupation does not really exist concretely in Nigeria, the way it does in Europe and America. Apart from 'women in Nigeria', a fledgling feminist organization yet to implant its relevance on the social consciousness of the Nigerian people, the only remarkable women's organization to whom most of the initiative of popular mobilization belongs is the largely reactionary body called the National Council of Nigerian Women. By this token, feminist criticism has yet to evolve into a critical discipline in Nigeria. It is no wonder that in

almost all the journals and sustained studies on feminist thinking and writing, there is hardly any mention of Africa. Such is the paucity of information on the feminist experience of the black people that I was intrigued as well as amused reading a major study recently, on feminism. The book has only one chapter on Black Feminism and that chapter was shared with Lesbianism (P. 185).

In *The Dragon's Funeral*, the women of Osisioma Ngwa plan, engage in and execute feats that rescue the womenfolk and, indeed, the entire community from mass exploitation. The success they attain is traceable to their conscious identification of whom the problem/enemy is. Adaugo explains as follows:

Adaugo: Women of my ancestral land, there is dust in the air. Evil men have enveloped our land. The name of that evil, that dust is government. We have heard different rumours about what government is doing and even what it intends to do. Our husbands have heard it, our children have heard it, even the trees of our land have heard it. The serene atmosphere of this village will soon be disrupted by *the strangers in our midst who call themselves government* (Nwabueze, 2005:18; my emphasis).

The women's recognition of their enemy gives a sense of direction to their eventual steps. In addition, it is apparent from the excerpt above that the women are fretful about the imminent disruption of peace in the village. This disposition colours their quest with altruism, unlike Koko's movement which emphatically seeks benefits that are the exclusive preserve of women. Such self-seeking ventures negate Ezeigbo's concept of snail sensitivity which encourages women to strategize on "how to complement the man and join forces with him to develop the society for the benefit of all" (Ezeigbo, *Gender Issues*, 2012:29).

The women in *The Dragon's Funeral* work in consonance with men in Osisioma land to achieve a common goal – the resistance of imposed taxation on them (women). As a result, they resist the inclination to deride the men of Osisioma Ngwa. According to Adaugo,

...Our aim is not to fight our husbands. Our aim is not to confront men unnecessarily, even if they are strangers. Our aim is not to show that we are indispensable to men. In executing our actions, we should ensure that we don't fail in our duties as wives, as daughters, as mothers, as the epitome of peace in our community. Our aim is to fight injustice, to fight for our rights, to fight for our children. (Nwabueze, 2005:24).

Apparently, while the women of Osisioma Ngwa seek the protection of their marriage, home and community, those of Erhuwaren do not. They are rather reminiscent of Lysistrata and her women who publicly ridicule men over their inability to endure a long period of sexual abstinence. Although Lysistrata's actions may be justified since she seeks to end the Peloponnesian war, Koko's vision may not be beneficial to the entire community but women. Koko and her followers exploit "deprivation" and "abscondment" to prove their indispensability to men while the women of Osisioma Ngwa emphasise mutual cooperation, cohabitation and complementarity with men in their struggle. Hence, their men's support for them. Chief Okeugo states, thus:

Chief Okeugo: We have been asked to count our people and to reveal their financial power. The idea is to impose some tax on every adult of this community, male or female. But I tell you, my people, it is unethical to count our women because once they are counted they will be taxed... (Nwabueze, 2005:48).

Although Chief Okeugo's opinion coheres with Adaugo's, it does not preclude the women from challenging him when he switches camps. Therefore, the women resist his eventual resort to execute Cook's instruction. This remarkably makes antagonism a fluid experience in the play, prompting questions on whom the real opponent is. This mutability of antagonism bespeaks an issues-based protest by the women. Taxation, not men, is the issue. Therefore, any supporter of its imposition on women by the colonial authorities, qualifies as an opposition.

This is antithetical to the feminist experience in *The Wives' Revolt*. Koko's feminist strategy generalises all men as deserving of punishment. In spite of Idama's sympathy for the women's cause for example, he is inflicted with no lesser punishment than Okoro's. That is, Koko's

feminist scheme demonizes all males, including acquiescing men, as well as shuts them out of the feminist movement. This is where her strategy markedly differs from Adaugo's. Although "the female characters... like Adaugo and Ikodie have depth of character and seem to be united in their revolutionary activities," their overriding aim is not to punish men but to sanitize the society of colonial policies that impede on their (women's) economic freedom (Amaonyeze 74). Interestingly also, the women squarely focus on attaining their goal. This, indeed, coheres with the source story of the play – the 1929 Aba Women's Riot – as well as Ezeigbo's concept of Snail Sensitivity which emphasizes a negotiation-based panacea for incidents that are inimical to the progress of women.

At the end, the abortion of the taxation policy favours the entire Osisioma land in *The Dragon's Funeral* while the men of Erhuwaren seem to have been bullied, defeated and conquered by their wives, in *The Wives' Revolt*. This situation reinforces Nnolim's position that, "there must be another method of achieving self-actualization in a dignified manner" since any liberation gotten "through questionable behaviour debases rather than enhances the image of women" (Clark, 1991:50).

Conclusion

This study has argued that certain strategies women adopt in the feminist movement plague them with worse portraits than the perceived oppression against them. Having attempted a comparative analysis of the texts under study, this paper calls for the reformation of the Nigerian brand of feminism to be more remedial, proactive and responsive to the concerns of humanity. For example, Koko's emission of anti-men ringtones and convocation of schemes to collapse marital institutions challenge the moral foundation of her struggle. The strategy is a sweeping attack on all men as (potential) oppressors. Based on her (Koko's) feminist narrative, women who, in the course of feminist agitation, try to make marriages work (such as Adaugo) should be considered as weak, faint-hearted and brainwashed. This feminist philosophy makes Koko complicit in the unwitting oppression of women.

Although her intention is to champion the women's cause, the result is adverse on the society. The ascription of bravery to women of Erhuwaren who trumpet divorce and abscondment from home for every slip in marriage or perceived injustice against them, is capable of increasing the cases of divorce witnessed in Nigeria today. It is a recipe for amplifying the number of broken homes and single mothers who litter the society, echoing divisive chants and deriding men in public. The latter-day Nigerian feminists should prioritize a period-specific goal to guide the agitation. While acknowledging that issues affecting women are not monolithic, the need for a roadmap cannot be gainsaid. It would help channel all the feminists' efforts towards a particular main objective and different minor aims within the specified period. In the absence of unity of purpose, we would continue to have emergency feminists who are not rooted in the knowledge and vision of the movement.

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