

GENDER EQUALITY AND THE NEED FOR AN EGALITARIAN SOCIETY: A STUDY OF TRACIE-UTOH'S *OUR WIVES HAVE GONE MAD AGAIN* AND J. P. CLARK'S *THE WIVES\$ REVOLT*

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Abstract

Feminism has taken different forms at different times. Some are sympathetic to the women fold, hence seeking to bring some sort of changes in the position of women. This form of feminism challenges the idea of male dominance and the oppressive tendencies experienced by women. Other forms aim to correct the misguided notion of fight for gender equality as propagated by some bourgeois women. These forms of feminism candidly indict the oppressiveness of some materialist women who like their male counterparts have taken to segregate, marginalize and subdue both the common women and men alike. These capitalist women only aim to make a career out of feminism. They misplace the priority of womenfolk for selfish aims. Using *Our Wives Have Gone mad Again* and *The Wives Revolt*, this paper seeks to highlight the different forms taken by African playwrights in their presentation of female characters in their fight for liberation. It looks into these two different forms of feminism in order to determine the factors which propelled playwrights to take a particular side in their fight for gender equality. It weighs the actions taken by the culturally propelled patriarchal men and

the socially and economically motivated capitalist women in their bids to gratify self through different means of oppression. Based on the research findings, the paper advocates for more unprejudiced plays that will truly seek for an egalitarian society where both men and women would be free of gender oppression.

Keywords: Feminism; Equality; Oppression; Egalitarian; Gender

Introduction

Feminism has taken different forms at different times and at different places. Some feminist works are sympathetic to women, while some others expose and criticize the unruly and unrestrained attitude of some overzealous women. This second phase, overtly backs out from taking sides with some set of females who in their wrong perception of the notion and the goal of feminism; have stepped into the shoes of the misogynists. Thereby, acting contrarily to the principles of feminism (which its main goal is to uphold the Course of gender equality). Although feminism mainly campaign for women's rights, its aim (gender equality) includes support for the rights of men too. This paper looks into these two different forms of feminism in order to determine the factors which propelled playwrights to take a particular side in their fight for gender equality.

Looking at works of the Nigerian feminist writers over the years, it has been discovered that there exist some feminist plays authored by women playwrights who unsentimentally do not cover up or condole atrocities committed in the name of feminism by some misguided women. There are also plays written by male authors who unequivocally ridicule and criticize patriarchies and misogynists. The two plays used in this paper show that the place where the play is set and the socio-political or socio-economic system of the time of the play has a great influence on the playwright and also determines the side he/she takes. According to Dobie, "Feminist criticism, a case in point, is difficult to define because it has not yet been codified into a single critical perspective. Instead, its several shapes and directions vary from one country to another" (104). Generally, feminism seeks to bring about some sort of change in the position of Women. It challenges both the idea and fact of male dominance. The premise that unites Nigerian feminist playwrights is the assumption that most Nigerian cultures are fundamentally patriarchal, hence, creating an imbalance of power that marginalizes women. Most

Nigerian cultures operated on the assumption that women were inferior creatures. It is against this backdrop that Nigerian feminist playwrights set out to sensitize, encourage and liberate the female-folks through their plays.

The first leg of feminist plays in Nigerian take the form of "liberal feminism" which claims that gender differences are not based on nature and therefore that women and men are not all that different. This theory according to Lober, emphasizes the need for women to have the same legal rights as men and the same educational and work opportunities (15). Authors who wrote in this form are believed to have been inspired by the socio-political terrain of the time. At those times, women were hardly heard in Nigeria. Women who lived at those times were servitude and almost completely submissive to the dictates of the men. They lived under the guide of the adage which says that "Women are to be seen and not heard". The result was that these women merely lived for the men-folk- they had no lives of their own. They were denied the legal rights to properties, the rights to air their opinion and the rights to social freedom. Nigerian playwrights of the time, thus, seeing the negative effects of such cultural biases to the entire nation and humanity; embarked on correcting the misogynist and patriarchal system which encouraged gender inequality.

Thus, leaning towards a subject that is of particular interest to women, Clark presents a play that is wholly sympathetic to the female characters. *The Wives Revolt* is set in 1991 at Urhobo area of Niger-Delta, Nigeria. That was before the Federal Government established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000. The NDDC was created largely as a response to the demands of the population of the Niger Delta. Before the establishment of the NDDC, some ethnic groups in the Niger Delta area established organizations to confront the Nigerian government and the multinational oil companies that explored their oil. This is because in spite of the environmental degradation and pollution caused by the exploration of oil, these oil producing areas received little or no compensation for the damages done to their land through exploration of oil. As a result of negative effects caused by exploration of oil to their land, underdevelopment and poverty rocked the area at the time. It is against this backdrop that Clark created a play based on the realities of the time of the play. Before the formation of the NDDC, the oil companies were giving money to the chiefs and elders of their host communities to have them pacified. However, the conflict of the play becomes the money sent by the oil company. As shown in the "Proclamation" by Okoro:

Okoro: ... it is the matter of the money sent by the oil company operating in our land ... This sum ... has been shared out in three equal parts ... However, our women-folk, led by a few reckless ones fed up with doing simple duties for their husbands and children as befits good housewives, are repudiating this fair and reasonable distribution of the money ... (1)

Primarily, the responsibility for making decisions, as the play depicts, lie on the elders who are all male. So, the world of the play has a patriarchal structure. It constitutes economic exploitation and marginalization of women. Looking at it from the "Development Feminist" criticism, the women receive less money of the oil company than what the men get. The money here is not paid for any work done. It is sent to help alleviate poverty. The men while sharing the money do not put this aim into consideration. The result is that widows in the community will get meager share of the money, no matter how many children they have to carter for. Thanks to the patriarchy-resistant women who boldly oppose the marginalization meted upon the women-folks. In Okoro's "Proclamation", he terms those women who spur other women into action as "reckless." Okoro represents the patriarchal of the community. His andocentric tendency blurs his true sense of reasoning as his dialogue with Idarna indicates. He lives falsely as he denies his sufferings due to his male ego. Blinded by his own conceit, (a male trait), he rebuffs Idama's admittance of guilt over the males' denial of egalitarianism with the females.

Okoro: If you already miss your woman so badly, go on then, peel off your wrapper and spread it before them at their feet and pour there all the money you have to your name as the Yoruba do at their weddings. I suppose you have a lot of money to give away, considering you didn't reject your share of the oil money. (24)

He pretends not to be affected by the absence of his wife, but we see him grumbles as the play progresses- he complains of the difficulties he undergoes while trying to make fire for cooking, he complains of the hard times his children give him. Yet, he continues to boastfully reject to admit the value of his wife.

Women in the play are not given any part in decision making, Hence, the decisions are geared towards the continuous elevation of patriarchy and subjection of the female gender. Accordingly, Okoro who is portrayed as a misogynist strongly believes that there is no point putting the course of women into consideration while making important decisions in the community. While Koko, his wife complains about the discriminating treatment against women by the men, Okoro shows no remorse whatsoever. This can be seen in her words and his reply:

Koko: And you had your way. Now; why won't you men accept that, in your management of affairs, you are no better than the pigs that with his snout digs up our cassava, up-roots our yams before either is ripe for harvest, and, in spite of all this havoc it causes, still enjoys full sway over our lives?

Okoro: If you women feel so strongly about the matter, you should go and build fences around your farms. (10)

Their previous conversation shows that these destructive pigs are owned by men. But because men have all the responsibility of decision making, these pigs are not ostracized by the men. But the goats owned by the women are banished by the men from the community. The imagery of pig is used to describe the male and the extent of their intimidation against the women. The play clearly shows the men as holders of authority and the only ones who wield influence in the community. They are the ones who also control the finances of the community. Okoro cannot even comprehend why the women would revolt against the laws made by the authority holders of the community. For Okoro, there is no justifiable reason for the women's revolt. Idama is presented as a male who empathizes with the cause of the women. Hence while Idama condemns the one-sided law that discriminates against the women, Okoro seems to be confused about the justification for these women's revolution.

Idama: ... it was a bad law we passed, Oko, admit it.

Okoro: [Springing to his feet] A bad law? The law is the law, and these women have broken it. They must be arrested, tried and punished.

Idama: So you have already decided they are guilty? Now how have they broken the law? Have they stopped you acting in the course of

your duty? Have they defied your expulsion order? Rather, they have expelled themselves so that the law we have passed can have full sway, giving you every right to impound their goats.

Okoro: True, you are right there. But what do these women think they are doing?

Idama: Exercising their rights.

Okoro: Women have no rights - no special rights that I know of.. (21)

The above conversation between Okoro and Idama prove the extent of Okoro's disregard for the female gender. For him, women are just tools to be used by men. He sees women as people that do not have their own lives, but are made solely to be used by men for procreation and home management. The play portrays a world in which the female characters do not play an overt part in decision making. When it comes to making decisions that pertain to important matters in the community, the females and their interests are relegated to the background. Hence, the women in the play act behind the scene. It is from behind the scene that they planned and execute their revolutionary actions.

The female characters in *The Wives Revolt* play traditional roles of childbearing, child-rearing and home-keeping. Yet the men seem not to appreciate their value and indispensability as is shown in the dialogue below:

Idama: I still think we should go and meet them before they go too far, We need them badly at home.

Okoro: For what?

Idama: Oh, there are so many things women do that we cannot do.

Okoro: Tell me one of them ... What does a woman do that you cannot do and do better?

This play also presents the contemporary times with Idama representing the fair men who in various spheres of life have helped to push women forward by supporting and favouring the course of women. These set of men see women as the weaker gender that ought to be protected and supported. In this play we see the real world of the contemporary times. The contemporary times do not come with all the males oppressing and suppressing females. So many women have attained their dreams through motivation and support from males. In like manner, the play in a bid to recreate the contemporary times, present us

with misogynists and patriarchies as represented by Okoro. In one of his dialogues with Idama, he opines that it is difficult for women to be united. Hence, their fight for gender equality will not last long as women are apt to fight one another.

Okoro: Rubbish: I'm not going to beg anybody. Not those women. You wait and see. They'll come back on their own soon enough. They can't stick together for long ... (22)

Female characters in this play through dint of bravery and courage attain freedom through a calm and peaceful revolution. In their tender-heartedness as mothers, they do not mete out any form of unfair treatment against the opposite sex; rather they exile themselves so the men could achieve fully their, newly made law which is directly detrimental to the well-being of the women. The females accomplish their aim and they are honoured for their accomplishments. At the end of the play (as relates by Okoro in the "Reclamation"), the women are consulted by the male characters (who are the lawmakers) before further decisions are taken. This is as opposed to their total neglect at the beginning of the play. The beginning of the play has the males take important decisions and merely inform the females thereafter. The story of the play disapproves the power structure of patriarchy. It condemns misogyny.

The second phase of feminism in Nigeria is epitomized by *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!* by Chiima Tracie-Utoh. A play written in a style that is not one of the forms traditionally associated with female playwrights. The subject is does not particularly empathize with females. However, it is of great importance to women's well-being, as it presents contemporary women iii their newly found political ambition and their misdirected abuse of power. Antithetical to the feminist activities in which female writers indict and vilify men, Utoh chooses to be different. She frankly captures the contemporary Nigeria and the activities of some female politicians.

The campaign for gender equality by the first wave of Nigerian feminists was aimed at raising the stand of women in Nigeria where there were clear and vast imbalances. Plays supporting and agitating for the rights of women were indeed necessary for the first wave of feminism in Nigeria owing to cultural, political and social climate at the time.

In accordance with the socio-political terrain of the contemporary Nigeria however (where a lot of women hold political positions and head

important and sensitive offices), *Our Wives have Gone Mad Again* agitates for liberation not just of females from misogynists and patriarchies, but also for males from misandrists and women who are misogynists. The play suggests that fights for the liberation of females alone is really irrelevant in modern Nigeria. Since, to a considerable extent, Nigerian women have been equipped with the same opportunities as were enjoyed by only the men in previous times. The first waves of feminism in Nigeria was staring at glaring prejudiced legislations and cultural values, but in today's dynamic Nigeria; it is not only outdated but misplaced as evident in Utoh's *Our Wives Have' gone Mad again*. The play presents the excessive desires of the contemporary woman politician in her pursuit of political power. As we have mentioned elsewhere in this paper, this play deviates from the form that is traditionally associated with female writers. Influenced by the socio-political tetra in of her time, the playwright presents a work that is clearly not sympathetic to the merciless women politicians of the contemporary Nigeria. The play calls for egalitarianism between the two genders. It leans neither towards the interest of the misogynist nor does it dance to the tune of the misandrist. It rather presents the follies of some males and females of its time. The male characters in the play choose idleness to being operative. Hence, making themselves parasitic to their female counterpart. Due to their lazy attitude, they live to exploit the female characters. The indolent and parasitic male is exemplified in Iyang the husband of Ene. His duty is to keep the house while his wife sees to the financial obligations of the family In SITUATION ONE, he is described so: "*Inyang is busy sweeping and dusting, as Ene, Funmi and Mairo enter the room. Halfway in, Ene comes to a stand-still and surveys the room with disgust and disapproval*".

Ene: (*waves her hands expansively*) Inyang, What is the meaning of all this?

Inyang: (*straightens up*) What? Madam Ene you have come. Welcome. Madam Funmi and madam Mairo welcome. (22)

Iyang takes to being subservient and so his wife is propelled to lord it over him. As it is shown in the dialogues that ensue between them:

Ene: (Stand-offish) Welcome yourself, foolish man. (*Pointing*) Look at the clock. Is this the time your mates clean the house? Lazy idiot! (*Ene expresses her disgust mid then marches to a settee ...*) (22).

In the same vein, the play exposes the hard-heartedness of some women politicians as they callously mock the male genders. This is exemplified in Funmi showing her disdain for the male genders.

Funmi: Ene my sister, we all have different grades and degrees of imbeciles in our homes but what shall we do? Men are necessary evils or so they say (23).

The female characters in *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again* are not so much different from the misogynists portrayed in traditional feminist plays. They manifest traits of misandrist through denigration of men, violence against men and objectification of male characters. The female characters seem to mistake misandry for feminism which aims at the equality of both male and female. Feminists do not despise men rather they advocate for equity of all genders. The female characters in this play act contrary to the principles of feminism which preaches equality for all. Ene does not hide her contempt for the males as exemplified in the way she treats her husband Inyang. Below is an instance:

Ene: (Furious.) Inyang, how long does it take you to walk to my fridge and bring the drinks I bought with my money?

Inyang: Sorry Madam. It is the tumbler. I have to wash it before I bring them.

But Ene does not care about what keeps him from waiting on her friends hastily as she expects. Rather, she keeps raining abuses on him.

Ene: (Cuts in.) See how you are blabbering like a fool in front of my friends. A fool that cannot take simple instructions ...

Inyang: But, Madam Ene, I am trying to make you happy. Why are you scolding me? What is my offence now? (26).

Inyang's addressing his wife as "Madam Ene" is a pointer to lack of cordial relationship between the couple. This may be as a result of Ene's refusal to bridge the socio-economic gap between herself and Inyang. The play shows that the female characters are the ones who make the rules which the male ought to live by.

An overt reason for conflict in the play is the fact that the female characters bear the financial burdens of their families. As we see in Ijeorna's case:

Ijeoma: What shall I do? The situation is beyond me. We are always fighting. Yet I shoulder all the responsibility in the house. I pay the children's school fees, I pay the house rent, the electricity bill, the water bill...I buy the food we eat, the clothes we wear: the car we drive ... I pay for every single thing in the house. I have never asked him what he does with the miserable salary he receives. (30)

Some of the female characters try to be good wives but their insensitive husbands keep frustrating their efforts. This is express by Funmi:

Funmi: It is your fault. You made him independent. You found a job for him. You should have left him to continue his job as your driver. That way, he would always have respected you. But you wanted him to have self-esteem. See where it has got you. (30)

The play begins with a different language as would be expected of a female writer but as the play progresses, its language changes to that relatively close to the traditional feminist writers.

Ene: Next time your husband picks a quarrel with you, make sure you teach him a bitter lesson. Keep a weapon handy. You can put the weapon in a corner of the house where you can easily reach it. That big pestle your house girl uses to pound yam can serve the purpose. When he makes a move towards you, draw him towards your weapon. Take the weapon and deal him a deadly blow at the back of the head ... (32)

The play here employs an aggressive revolution against intimidation. The end of the play exposes the inordinate political ambition of these women and the desperation they exhibit in their attempt to attain political positions. They are shown engaging in blackmails against their Opponents, killings and lying in a bid to attain political power. Chief Mrs Irene is shown in SITUATION FOUR employing the services of a prostitute in order to stifle the political ambition of her male opponent through blackmail. However, she is not, shown by the play as one who fights for the general good of women, Neither is she vying for presidency in order to promote the course of women. All the ambition she nurses, are mainly for her own self-gratification.

It is evident that the target audience of this play cuts across both genders. This is because the play is neither written in a masculine style nor is

it written in a feminine style. The author seems to be interested basically in capturing the real world of the play's time and place. The play is set in the city of the contemporary Nigeria. The characters are drawn from The Northern and Southern parts of Nigeria. They represent the entire Nigerian people. The play neither sympathizes with the female characters, nor is it empathizing with the male characters. It shows instances where men (represented by Zeus) are ruthless in the way they treat the female characters.

Zeus: (aggressive) Don't ask me such stupid questions. This is my house. I am a man! I can come and go as I like. Don't ever question my conduct. Do you hear? Now, get into the kitchen and serve my food, I am famished.

We are meant to know that Zeus left his house three days ago and the above dialogue is his answer to his wife who inquires to know why he has been away from home without notifying her.

CONCLUSION

Plays are products of their own time and place. So feminism as a style of writing has employed different forms at different times and in different places. Propelled by the cultural values of most Nigerian ethnic groups, which were mostly discriminating against the female gender, the first wave of Nigerian playwrights who subscribed to the tenets of feminism, wrote plays which are overtly sympathetic to the female characters. This form is exemplified by J. P Clark's *The Wives Revolt* in this paper. The play is totally against the socioeconomic system which operates under the guide of patriarchy. This was (and is still in some places), the system most Nigerian traditional system operated. The play written in the year 1999, and set in the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria: has the male characters embedded with all the authority of leadership. The males are laden with authority to make laws that govern the community. The males therefore make laws that are favourable to the male genders and marginalize the females. Propelled by the miseries and harm these laws caused them, the women of the community embark on a peaceful revolution against patriarchy.

The second wave of feminism in Nigeria has taken several forms. While some continue on the track of female liberation, Utoh employs an unbiased form in an attempt to capture the contemporary Nigeria socio-political

realities. Although a female playwright, Utoh candidly recreates the sociopolitical life of the desperate female politician who operates with the desperation of the capitalist. Utoh does not spare the men either. She exposes the idleness and ruthless behaviour of some men. Contemporary Nigerian social, economic and political system gives equal rights to both male and female genders. Male and female in Nigeria have equal rights as citizens. So the playwright's campaign does not run solely for women liberation but for equality of both men and women who suffer as a result of gender differentiation. *Our Wives Have Mad Again* implicitly highlights and tackles inequality issues that effect men and/or women. The play is not set .on a fight for the rights of women as most feminist plays clearly do. Rather, it opted for equality of both male and female genders.

The first wave of feminism in Nigeria rightly advocated for women liberation (given the social, cultural and economic context of its time). But to keep cranking up on women's right at this age might lead to misplaced priority among females as shown in *Our Wives Have Mad Again*. Where one of the strategies employed by the characters is the suppression of their male counterparts. The female characters in the play are motivated by selfish reasons. Hence their fight tends towards individual gratification instead of collective freedom for all women. The female characters in this play are guided by illogical, biased and extremist values. The play also shows that the female characters are also perpetrators of evil like: domestic violence, sexual objectification and blame towards all men. These misandries have imbibed the same selfish and egoistic attitudes exhibited by the misogynists who practice gender differentiation.

Looking at works of the Nigerian feminists over the years, it has been discovered that they are some feminist plays authored by women playwrights who unsentimentally do not cover-up or condole atrocities committed by some overzealous women in the name of feminism. There are also plays written by male authors who unequivocally ridicule and criticize patriarchy and misogynist. The two plays used in this paper have shown that political system, time and place have huge influence on feminist playwrights and tend to determine the side the dramatist stands. The playwrights did not write out of vacuum but were inspired by the socio-political and economic system which operated at their time of writing the plays. It was the happenings around the playwrights that helped in molding and shaping their works. So, the angle and side taken by a particular feminist playwright largely depends on the place and time the play is set.

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