

UNEARTHING THE EXPLOITS OF MATRIARCHY IN IFEOMA OKOYE'S THE NEW BUSINESS WOMAN

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Abstract

In most African traditional societies, women are generally epitomized as weak and hence are subjected to marginalization, deprivation, oppression, humiliation and subjugation as portrayed in the roles assigned to them in the male authored literary texts. This study attempts to critically discuss the concept of matriarchy, its challenges and adversities. Using content analysis approach of qualitative research method, the study highlights the activities of the female character Mercy, in Ifeoma Okoye's *The New Business Woman* to capture her exploits. It provides an insight into interpreting contending issues as regards why men vastly outnumber women in leadership positions, if women are physically, mentally and emotionally able to lead and whether women should be encouraged to take leadership positions. The theory of womanism is adopted for the analysis. The study revealed that women are adorned with potency, vigour, unique and modest reasoning in deciphering issues in their families as well as society at large and therefore should be encouraged to take leadership positions.

Keywords: Women, Leadership, Position, Matriarchy, Feminism.

Introduction

Matriarchy is a form of social organization in which the mother or oldest female is given the privilege to be the head of the family. Matriarchy, according to Fatima Binta Ibrahim is a reaction to the "reoccurring decimal that inhibits the women's capacity to enjoy their human rights where power and supremacy have been arrogated to men" (475). The struggle by women to be domestically, financially and economically independent is emphasized as being matriarchy. The word matriarchy, for an organization politically led by females, especially mothers, who also have control of property, is often interpreted as the opposite of patriarchy. While patriarchy is the rule of males over the female as characterized by the male dominating system, matriarchy, is the struggle of the female in the unequal class position. Matriarchy, hence, becomes the weapon for female politics in search for a new identity. Patriarchy and matriarchy are simply indicators of the division of labour in the stereotyped societal manner. Patriarchy is the rule of the father over the mother as characterized by the male dominating system where the female is subordinate (Fatima

Binta Ibrahim 475), while, female power is just like the air, though everywhere but it's hardly noticed, its quiet ubiquity acts like a camouflage.

Margot Adler describes matriarchy as the government by mothers or government and power in the hands of women (13). The women occupy the ruling position in the family. The women's power is equal or superior to men's. A society can be called matriarchal when descent, inheritance and succession are in the female line and when the authority over the child is wielded by the mother or her relatives. Kinship is exclusively acknowledged in the female line in a matriarchal society. A matriarchal society practices visiting marriage. The men live in the clanhouse of their mothers and visit their wives, and the visit is restricted to the night. A matriarchal man never regards the children of his wife as his children, because they do not share his clanname. They are only related to the women whose clan-name they have. Matriarchal man, however, is closely related to the children of his sister, his nieces and nephews. They have the same clan-name as he. His attention, his care for their upbringing, the personal goods he passes on: all this is for the niece and nephews. Biological fatherhood is not known, or is paid no attention. (Goettner-Abandroth 6)

In the process of taking a political decision, no member of the household is excluded. Every decision is taken by consensus. Women are greatly respected in matriarchal societies. Chinweizu, however asserts that a society cannot be strictly matriarchal or patriarchal, rather, it can have matriarchal and patriarchal subsystems and these usually complement each other. He explains matriarchy as a form of social organization in which the female head (matriarch) exercises dominant power while the male head is her lieutenant who operates its formal machinery of authority. The patriarch is the head while the matriarch is like the neck that controls that head. The patriarch, who is a one-man ministerial cabinet which helps the matriarch exercise her monarchical powers, is the figure head, with more of the aura of authority. A matriarch can quietly veto any of her husband's decision which do not suit her, though feminist deny matriarch power. The penultimate power and structures of authority may be in the hands of the patriarchs, but the ultimate power lies in the laps of matriarchs hence the saying "mother is supreme". (110 – 114). In most patriarchal societies, "women seem to be judged more harshly than men". African traditional society has been conditioned to think of power as male and that a powerful woman is an aberration. As a result, she is policed. People tend to ask "is she humble? Does she smile? Is she grateful enough? Does she have a domestic side" (Adichie 4).

Women suffer all kinds of oppression sexual, religious, cultural, political, social and economic. According to Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, no group or class has been more designated or muzzled than woman in any society. No part of the world is exempted from this 'crime' against womanhood, although some societies and cultures are guiltier than others (73 – 74). This may be probably because the world is unfortunately patriarchal. Every female including the most uncompromising feminist traces her origins, her genealogy from the male line, hence the surname of every female is patronymic. The debasement of the female image is as old as the Bible and Koran, and has other origins in pre-historic literature and mythology (Nnolim 144).

The feminist theorists also address the use of masculinized language like "God the Father" which is looked upon as a way of designating the sacred, as solely men. Biblical language in other words glorifies men through masculine pronouns like 'he' and 'him' and address God as a 'He'.

In most traditional societies, people as a result, devalue womanhood and regard woman as the 'second sex' according to the French feminist existential writer, Simone de Beauvoir. She argues that French culture and Western societies in general are patriarchal. The men define what it takes to be human. The female is always secondary or nonexistent. She believes that women are not born inferior but rather are made to be so (Dobie 105). Her *The Second Sex* is a cornerstone of twentieth century feminism – owing to its powerful and controversial impact on feminist thought. It examines "several literary work and shows how literature has functioned so as to propagate and uphold misogynist myths of womanhood" (Goring et al 210). It provides the vocabulary for analyzing the social constructions of femininity and a method for critiquing the constructions.

Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* portrays how society socializes and conditions the female to see herself as an incomplete and inferior human being which makes her lose faith in her sex, while the male is brought up to be strong, proud of himself and to view himself as superior to the female. Adimora-Ezeigbo laments that: from childhood, the female is confronted with her insignificance and her subservient role in society. She internalizes these images that condemn her to a life of perpetual dependence and diffidence. Some of her "sisters" are confined in the home or if they ever venture out of the door, they are compelled to cover themselves like masquerades – apparitions that frighten innocent children in broad daylight. (74)

Women have the tendency to keep quiet and suffer in silence. Society has always prescribed silence, reticence, complaisance, patience and gentleness as the greatest virtues of the feminine gender, thus creating an object that Virginia Woolf derogatorily described as "The Angel in the House" in her *A Room of One's Own*. Culturally, agencies of socialization hand over sex-role stereotypes from generation to generation. Socialization therefore, influence sexrole stereotypes from early childhood when female children role-play nurses, while the males play hunters (Nwosu 40). The Theory of Womanism:

The theoretical premise of this research is hinged on the theory of womanism. Alice Walker coined the term womanism in her collection of essays titled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* in 1983. Her first entry describes womanist as the opposite of girlish (which means frivolous, irresponsible or not serious). Womanism is derived from the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanishly" indicating outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behaviour. The four adjectives refer to doing something that is not easy, with strong determination and a lot of motivation. 'Wilfull' is emphasized because for so long, many black women have not been considered to be in possession of their own free wills. Womanism is associated with being responsible and in charge of the fate of black women.

Walker defines womanism in her second entry by referring to the different types of relationship that can occur between women. Womanists should love other women, and cherish their nature. She is not hostile towards men in as much as she pleads with her women to love one another because of the fact that they are females. Womanism, infact, supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking men. She states clearly that womanists are not separatists, but rather traditionally universalists. She illustrates this by means of the metaphor of the garden in which the women and men of different colours coexist like flowers in a garden yet retain their cultural distinctiveness and integrity. There is an indication that tolerance is desired for a peaceful co-existence of both male and female. In the third entry, she defines womanist

associatively. She enumerates what womanists love. Womanists love struggle, which probably means that they do not give up too easily in their striving. Walker includes music, dance, love, food and roundness as symbols for the worldly, bodily pleasures in life as well as the moon and the spirit as symbols for the spiritual dimension of our being. The fourth and last entry consists of the statement "womanism is to feminist as purple to lavender" (Walker xii). She indicates that womanist is a synonym for a black feminist. Her reason for the choice of colour purple and lavender is not known. She lays so much emphasis feminist thought. It examines "several literacy work and shows how literature has functioned so as to propagate and uphold misogynist myths of womanhood" (Goring et al 210). It provides the vocabulary for analyzing the social constructions of femininity and a method for critiquing the constructions.

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Okoye probably uses Mercy to convey that a business is a business and therefore should be gender neutral. She portrays the first form of reputation depicted in the text as seen in Mercy's response, "Thank you sir, for your kind advice... I'm sorry but I have made up my mind about the business and I don't want to go back on my decision" (60). Her resolution indicates outrageous, audacious, courageous and willful attitude in line with the theory of womanism. Despite her state as a widow, she prefers to be a victor rather than a victim. She decides to be in charge of her own destiny (Nweke 201). Typical of a womanist, she talks to Adim without being hostile. In a very polite manner, she makes her points and believes strongly as she affirms; "I'm going to run the business myself and I'm going to succeed" (60).

Female marginalization in Africa is not in doubt, but Okoye carefully illustrates that women including widows in African cultural milieu can do a lot by themselves to solve their problems. Immediately Mercy realizes, she could succeed without Adim and Odo, "the myth of male superiority automatically disappears (Chukwuma 25). Unlike most widows, Mercy changed her ideas and beliefs into achievement. She has a vision. Her positive thought and confidence ensure her accomplishment. Okoye bestows on her a skill of entrepreneurship.

Having disregarded the outdated, imbedded socio-cultural doctrine that women are born inferior (Orabueze 118), Mercy goes to her husband's room to search for the business records. She studies it carefully. She studies Odo's monthly returns and compares her husband's records with Odo's. She discovers that the shop has not yielded much for two months after the end of the burial ceremony. Based on the fact that the 'liberated' Nigerian woman is better than her precolonial and colonial counterparts, she has the benefit of formal education (Chiluwa 113), Mercy could dictate the obvious discrepancy. The disparity between the two sets of accounts is

very clear and instructive. The issue of whether a woman is physically, emotionally and mentally able to take a leadership/managerial position is clarified in Mercy's decision-making capabilities. She considers herself a success rather than a failure. Her response demonstrates assertiveness despite Adim and Odo's effort to belittle her because of her sex. The repetition of "woman's business" however seems to provide answer to such questions as why men outnumber women in leadership/managerial positions. Odo insists without reservations, "I hear you want to run the business yourself ... I don't want to work under a woman. This is not a woman's business" (60). Okoye uses this medium to expose some ideological statements or social conventions that depreciate African women and "render them less significant than their male counterparts" (Ezenwa-Ohaeto).

It may be pertinent to ask if gender should be a proper yardstick for measuring capability? Can't a woman as man be innovative and creative? Chimamanda Adichie is of the opinion that a man can be physically stronger than a woman, but physical strength may not be the ultimate attribute for leadership (48). Mercy is not given an opportunity to try or learn the skills of the new business. She is barricaded from making an attempt because she is only a woman. This may be a calculated attempt for the writer to present a female character who will not only depend totally on men for sustenance but also to debunk the assumption that some vocations or businesses are strictly for men. Mercy vehemently maintains; "I will not sell it to Adim or to you or to any other person. I assure you it will not collapse" (63). The assurance in the statement obviously confirms that success is sure.

Mercy's exceptional determination to succeed, is highlighted in her discussion with Ezelue;

I want to attach myself to you as an apprentice, Mercy said. I want to learn how to deal in motor spare parts. How long do you think it will take you to learn the tricks of the trade?

About two months. I learn very fast. I'm going to work hard.

... How will you earn money for your food if you close the store? ... I will get a loan from the bank.

... You have no property and you're a woman.

I will look for someone to lend me money ...

I can pledge my husband's car, or at the worst, I'll sell it and use the money for food. My husband bought a new Peugeot 505 saloon a few months before he died. (65)

Okoye, through this dialogue, carefully reveals the other side of African woman. This also implies that a woman, if given the chance, may know the way as (Maxwell) writes that "a leader is one who knows the way, goes the way and shows the way. Impressed by her zeal, Ezelue promises to help her succeed. He will send her Innocent for three months, so she will learn the tricks of the business from him. The novelist portrays Ezelue, Afueke and Innocent as part of the few African men who believe "there's a problem on gender today and we must fix it" (Adichie 48). Ezelue admires Mercy's courage and wishes his two daughters could grow up to be as self confident and enterprising as she is. If Mercy's action could inspire Ezelue "to dream more, learn more, do more and come more" (Quincy Adams) she can take a lead.

Conclusion

African women, in line with womanist theory, have very strong determination and do not give up too easily in their striving. They are adorned with exceptional capability to manage, plan, coordinate and organize. The study is a clarion call to give women a space to explore their potentials, disregard the archaic assumption that women are born inferior and also encourage them to take certain managerial positions. To correct some conventional anomalies, Okoye endows Mercy, even as a widow, with a voice, courage, determination, physical, mental and moral stability to set a pace. Her attributes are commendable and inspiring. Okoye projects Mercy as a quitesence, an ideal woman, who is determined to take a bull by the horns and pave the way to the corridors of leadership.

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