Female Voices in African Drama: The Concept Self in Ama Ata Idoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock Of The Gods* And Tess Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*

By

Gloria Eme Worugji
Department of English &Literary Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar - Nigeria
E-mail address: ajieleeme@yahoo.com/ gloriaworugji@unical.edu.ng
&
Unimawhobe Bebiaye Ushie
Department of English &Literary Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar - Nigeria
E-mail address: patrick100ushie@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the thematic thrust of the three plays entitled *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, *The Broken Calabash* and *Wedlock of the Gods*, analysing 'self' and 'female voices' as concepts in the plays. The female voices and self-start from the playwrights to the key female characters in the selected plays. This is a succinct portrayal of female characters, defining their respective identities as they rebel against obnoxious traditional mores and values in a patriarchal world. Self is therefore the woman's voice that interrogates the plethora of repressive traditions and taboos that inhibit societal growth. The theory that informs this paper is the feminist theory with emphasis on the African feminism in addressing the intertwining concepts of self and female voices in the selected plays. The scope is limited to the three plays. The method of review and analysis is textual, using scholarly works and other relevant literatures. The findings reveal that the modern African female writers are conscious of the fact that the African woman is not well represented in the society even though she has grown past the level she is seen and placed, hence, their female characters are not stereotyped but assertive, brave and agents of change as against the usual docile and at the background. The African woman knows her rights and stand by it but, not disrespectful to the

culture per se. She is conscious of self and feels offended when associated with negativity as prescribed by patriarchy. It concludes that, for the purpose of development and growth in the society, the woman must be recognized and given a chance to prove her mettle as the plays revealed. This will further open space for more debates on female voices and the quest for self.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Female voices/character, African drama, identity, Self and Traditional mores.

Introduction

In a tense situation, there is bound to be diversity in thought, ideology and projections. Conflict is inextricably tied to human society and it makes or mars the entire fabric of peaceful co-existence. Because African society is highly patriarchal, dramaturgy in the eyes or hands of female writers seem to expose the female voices agitating for recognition and showing disillusionment towards certain values of society. In this respect, self can be the female image, interrogating existing order with a view to creating dynamism that can bring peace, unity and progress. This is what Gloria Eme Worugji, B. Enamhe and Eton Dien Simon in their paper titled " lmage of Women: Custom and Modernity in Selected Plays of James Ene Henshaw" is saying when they state that, " women are … peace makers and solution engineers to troubled society"(14).

The agitation for women to have their rights in society through the feminist ideology is seen by Grace Okereke to "project the woman's dissatisfaction with her patriarchally-inflicted condition and her struggle for emancipation and self-realization within the context of African cultural realities" (19). This assertion by Okereke could be likened to the role played by a major female character Titubi/Moremi in Moruntodun as presented by Gloria Eme Worugji's and Lydia Adamu Justin in" Women and Protest: The Nigerian Experience Expressed in Selected Plays by Three Nigerian Authors" (709-722), Titubi/Moremi represent bravery in their roles. They

saved and delivered their community from war through their organization of other women and sacrificing of selves, disputing the patriarchal image of the woman as the angel of the house. This is in line with Tonia Umoren's view that "… the African woman has blazed the trail of these traditional women stereotypes. She is a strong, determined woman and should be seen and presented as such" (12).

Since self-deals extensively with showing how one thinks, feels, reasons and projects, it snowballs into the female voices whose: "Major agenda here is to liberate the women from the confinements of patriarchal stereotypes in marriage, education, business and economy, history, politics and gender relationship" (Okereke 122). This expression on the "self image" of the woman, is further discussed in "The Feminine Sphere in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* by Eton Dien Simon and Gloria Eme Worugji.

Theoretical Framework

While citing Rose-Marie Tong, Mary E. Modupe Kolawole agrees that:

> Feminist theory is not one, but many theories or perspectives and that each perspective attempts to describe women's oppression, to explain its causes and consequences and to prescribe strategies for women's liberation. (11)

In this respect, the most apt theory that covers the three play texts is African feminism within the confines of Helen Chukwuma's ideology. In her words:

> The success of feminism is predicated on women's strength to be individuals, to assert themselves… African feminism unlike western feminism does not proffer a life without men… seeks a realization and use of natural power by women for self-fulfillment and social progress. It is a rejection of

> inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes of women which denied them a positive identity (25).

Therefore, Chukwuma's ideology can be tagged complementarity and female individualism. It is an implicit posture within the African feminist stand of Womanism

The Concepts of Self and Female Voices in Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma Of A Ghost*.

In this play, there is cultural conflict. The female voices create the conflict and the same female voices resolve the conflict while the male protagonist, Ato Yawson, is lost in the quest for a united, progressive and dynamic society. Ato Yawson, a young Ghanaian male, returns from USA after acquiring Western education with a Negro wife and finds difficulties re-uniting with his native culture. Eulalie, the African-American wife stands as the female voice antagonizing African culture. On the other hand, Esi Kom, Ato Yawson's mother, Monka his sister and Nana his grandmother stand as defenders of the traditional Ghanaian cultural heritage. The conflict arises from the rites of veneration of the stool and the child-bearing ideal of the Odumna clan. Charles Angmor clearly portrays Ato Yawson's state of mind thus:

> The physical setting reflects the opposing poles of the drama. It is an old family house with a new annex… Ato, in his bewilderment is torn between going to the annex and going to the old session… Ato has become a ghost, his true native personality having been negated by his westernisation (64).

Eulalie's voice is a voice in a strange land that finds bearing tracing her African roots as a descendant of a slave. She is in conflict with her new

society. She is the antithesis of the communal female folks of Ato's family. Equally, the 1st and 2nd women who are narrators help to show the good and bad sides of child bearing.

In simple terms, the conflict areas in the play text cannot be resolved by a hostile Eulalie or a confused Ato, but by the female voice of Esi Kom who embraces her daughter-in-law and takes her into the old homestead for a possible transformation to her new world, culture and love. While Ato tries to please his wife and family in vain, his mother resolves the conflict. (*The Dilemma*… 275)

The conflict of self in Eulalie living in a foreign land loses shape while the female voices of the family bring peace despite Ato's dilemma. It goes to confirm Rosemarie Tong's position that:

> It is a major challenge to contemporary feminism to reconcile the pressures for diversity and difference with those for integration and community. We need to have a home in which everyone has a room of her own, but one in which the walls are thin enough to permit a conversation. (Kolawole, 13).

Zulu Sofola – *Wedlock Of The Gods*

This play aptly showcases the concept of self and female voices in the thematic thrust. The three cardinal issues of conflict are forced marriage, seclusion and leviration marriage. Ogwoma is forced to get married to Adigwu who has the money to pay her bride price. The play portrays the pervading tentacles of indigenous culture and tradition as characters struggle between individual freedom and societal norms and conventions. (Nwadigwe, 481).

The play opens with voices of the female folks – Odibei and Otubo. The conflict sparks off as Odibei suspects that Ogwoma has started another love affair. Ogwoma and her friend Anwasia come in with the latter supporting

the grueling custom and tradition. In the words of Anwasia: 'Never has it been heard that only a month after a man's death his wife is already pregnant for another man. Ogwoma: Uloko is not another man…' (8)
From this expression of the self image and thought, Ogwoma points out her resentment for the yoke of a patriarchal tradition that enables a man to choose a wife for his daughter. She creates a metaphor out of it and sees herself as a goat "whipped along the road to a man you hated." (*Wedlock*… 9).

The female voices that support the patriarchal tradition of a father choosing a spouse for their daughter are Odibei, Nneka, Ogwoma's mother and Ogoli who is Uloko's mother. However, Ogwoma holds strongly to herself will and does not buy into the atavistic idea of being sold out to raise money to treat her ill brother. Uloko feels slighted as society places a premium on affluence; therefore his ego and emotions must be satisfied. Adigwu dies after three years of fruitless marriage and Ogwoma sees the demise of her husband as freedom from bondage. She breaks the customary rules of mourning and gets pregnant for Uloko. His mother Ogoli states clearly in antagonism: 'Now you have planted a foul seed in the womb of a woman in mourning. You planted a poisonous snake in the womb that has not been purified…' (*Wedlock*… 42).

After Odibei hypnotizes Ogwoma to drink a poisonous portion to death,
She is killed by Uloko, thus leaving repugnant customs and tradition to exist. Nwachigwe sums up the playtext as "a drama of love and vengeance executed on the platform of custom and tradition" (450).

In essence, the theme and plot of the play are ignited by the female voices, the climax centres on female voices and that of Ogwoma is the bedrock of the play. Her love for Uloko causes effects on her father, her late husband and Uloko. Her strong will and self determination can be seen in the words of Udo her uncle: "we know that she is very strong-willed. Many of us have

often wondered why she did not become a man" (*Wedlock*, 26). The conflict between a woman's self will and repulsive societal norms leads to female voices taking polemic positions.

Tess Onwueme's - *The Broken Calabash*

In this play, Onwueme objectifies her heroine to rebel against societal norms and beliefs. She is the opposite of Zulu Sofola who problematises tradition in such an infinitesimal manner that her heroine, Ogwoma, comes to a sorrowful and punitive end. Ona, the protagonist of Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*, faces the harsh realities of tradition since she is an *Idegbe*, an only child. She must remain in the family and have children for her father or marry a woman into the family. She falls in love with Diaku, a University graduate who is an outcast (Osu). The concept of self is succinctly exposed as Ini Uko submits:

> In *The Broken Calabash,* Ona initially idealises her values which are opposed to her father's. A period of introspective evaluation of her situation symbolises a process of garnering and concretising the courage and sensibility that she requires to define, articulate and pursue her goals (75).

With this conflict set in place, she is in a dilemma between her love for Diaku and the right tradition confers on her father courtuma. Chidi Amuta sees Courtuma's love for her daughter as having "something of an in cestuous streak about it with him thinking of and talking of and talking to his daughter in terms overloaded with Freudian overtones" (48). Courtuma's words can justify this Amuta's position:

> You can't fathom the extent of my love for you, my own jewel. My eye, my mouth. Don't you know you mean more than a daughter to me?... my little salt that gives taste to the soup. My little dry meat that fills the mouth. My speck of jewel that

> out-shines strings... of metals others use as ornaments. My diamond. I, who am your father and will always be father of your children generation after generation, even from my grave! You are my saviour, my comforter (*The Broken Calabash*, 87-88).

The question of self is Ona's resolve to break the "stagnant air of tradition' (*The Broken Calabash*, 72) and fight all that tradition does to wound her image projection. Courtuma frustrates Ona's desires as he breaks the calabash of palm wine offered by Diaku's family as part of the marriage process and that means "Ona's shattered emotional aspiration and stability as well as the tradition which Courtuma strives hard to protect and defend" (Amuta, 56). So Courtuma breaks tradition in an attempt to save another.

Diaku ends up marrying Ugo, a friend to Ona. In order to give tradition another big blow, Ona gets pregnant for another man and implicates her father in that incestuous affair. Courtuma is banished and commits suicide. She uses her father's earlier affectionate comment as a basis to cause her father damage. The most remarkable voice of self actualization or opposition to outdated and destructive traditional norms is in: "Let the shaky homestead be blown. Anything which cannot stand the force of change must be uprooted and be blown into oblivion by the storm heralding the new season". (*The Broken Calabash,* 43). This quote shows Ona's rebellion against the obnoxious laws of society.

Summary and Conclusion

In the three plays surveyed, there is the female voice (s) and the zeal for actualization. Womanhood has to antagonize certain societal statutes that hold sway from generation to generation. Aidoo explores the Ghanaian oral folklore and highlight the traditional hermeneutics. An African-American woman follows the impulse of love to her genetic origin and ends up in conflict of cultures. That concept of self in her and her husband's dilemma

stand in opposition to her. The female voice of unity and good motherhood makes that domestic comedy interesting.

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, a woman is so exasperated that she breaks rules, order, morals etc embedded in the tenets of tradition. Her rebellious acts make her an anathema, while the female voice protecting customary rites also dies with her in that tragedy. All in all, there is no paradigm shift in the obnoxious tradition of stepping on a woman's inalienable human right.

The Broken Calabash actually exposes a good fight between a modern girl and her traditional norms. She capitalises on her education and outplays her father using Christianity, her father's only western feature of influence, as she sneaks to see Diaku from Church or to see him at night. In essence, the female voices and expression of self in the play illustrates the women questioning the institutions that regulate the total essence of society and worldview.

The trio ie Ama Ata Aidoo, Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme handle with expertise issues of women and societal norms, values, mores and conflict of cultures as well as intrigues in gender relationship. The paper creates a synergy from different perspective on how self (image and individual perception) forms a gamut of female voices which brings to mind Ini Uko assertion that "people's resistance, opposition to, and rejection of certain values of tradition arise from their desire for the static nature of tradition to succumb to modification or change to cohere with the progressive and dynamic human nature" (52). This is exactly the trust of this paper. The self must stand out and speak for the needed and expected change to take place.

Recommendation

Since Literature and literacy educate the mind after reflecting on the values, foibles and complexities of the human societies, it is proper for the state (government of the nation) to influence the modification of certain laws and

traditional mores and statutes governing our societies. Men and women can only reach a point of unity "when they are liberated from asphyxiating gender stereotype in their perception of themselves" (Okereke, 125).

In essence, there must be unity of purpose and dynamism in certain traditional institutions. These adjustments proposed must include all stakeholders viz the custodians of the cultural heritage, the traditional rulers, males and females of diverse professions and the elders. Such laws that suppress | womanhood can be amended only when dialogue is involved. The three plays examined show binary opposition between the society and the attributes of joy, peace and happiness of womanhood.

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