DRAMA IN THE VANGUARD OF THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA

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Feminism is a female-oriented advocacy agenda. The term, *feminism*, takes its root from the Latin word, *femina*, meaning woman. Feminism, thus, is a doctrine geared toward addressing, in its totality, female marginalization and the unequal distribution of opportunities between men and women. From its little beginnings in America in the 1960s, the feminist movement has indeed spread its tentacles the world over, with the overall mission of bringing to a halt the tendencies toward the suppression of the woman on the one hand, and the promotion of a befitting portrayal of her social image on the other. Although it has, like an octopus, assumed varying shapes and forms in literature with changes in nomenclature here and there, the issues involved have remained basically the same. Whatever the tag, be it feminism, womanism (Walker, 1983), or motherism (Acholonu, 1995), they all, irrespective of the ideological posture or stance, are concerned with the notion of feminine subjugation and sexism. Thus, in varied contexts, and from diversified perspectives, the ideology continues to explore the point of view of women in all facets of life. Feminism is basically a "psychological revolution" (Bardwick, 1990) "a protestant ideology" (Tobrise, 1998) and, indeed, a social struggle in favour of egalitarianism in human societies. Feminist voices in literature are challenged to chart new ways of addressing the strangulating forces of patriarchy and so redress the bartered image of womanhood in a world that is largely patriarchal. The relevance of the feminist movement, in Bell Hooks' (1984:31) view, is judged by an ardent concern to "end sexist oppression."

This reawakening of interest in the promotion of the feminine ideals has assumed greater pertinence today, for it is one of the cardinal objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This reveals that the Feminist Movement has come of age and has become a force that can no longer be ignored. The vision of the MDGs pact of Year 2000 includes, among others, a striving to achieve completely maternal wellbeing (health), literacy, (women education) and equality of the sexes by 2015! It is approximately

eight years since the summit of 2000, more than half way through to the deadline set for the accomplishment of the defined obligations of MDGs. What hope is there for Africa toward achieving effectively these noble tasks? For any credible answer(s) to be given, further clarifications and assertions would have to be made on what so far has been achieved and what other strategies are being considered. This paper limits its study to the strategic use of drama to foster the feminist ideals. It sets out particularly to examine the portrayal of three female protagonists in plays selected for the study. In this regard, Femi Osofisan's **Titubi** in *Morountodun*, Tess Onwueme's **Ona** and **Wazobia** in her two respective plays *The Broken Calabash*, and *The Reign of Wazobia* have been chosen as paradigms of such female characters, who are representative of African (and specifically Nigerian) womanhood. However, before setting out to examine the female protagonists listed above against the background of their fictive worlds, it is pertinent to put in the right perspectives the position of womanhood in Africa, more especially against the delimiting factors of Nigerian cultural imperatives.

Of the early image of womanhood and patriarchy in Africa, so much can be gleaned and pieced together from early literary works. One such literary work in which the early image of the African woman is clearly depicted, is found in Okot p'Bitek's poetry collection, *Song of Ocol* (1967), where she is revealed as

> Sweeper
> Smearing floors and walls
> With cow dung and black soil
> Cook, *ayah*, the baby tied on your back
> Vomiting'
> Washer of dishes,
> Planting, weeding, harvesting,
> Store-keeper, builder,
> Runner of errands,
> Cart, lorry,
> Donkey...
> (p.133)

Reiterating further the other common views held of the early African woman, he addresses the notion of the woman as a private possession of man:

They buy you
With two pots
Of beer
The Luo trade you
For seven cows...

You are furniture,
Mattress for man
Your arm
A pillow
For his head! (p.134)

The literary proponents of the feminist ideology commonly hold that early writers, mostly males, have knowingly or otherwise, relegated the female species to the background. The woman, they assert, is crafted in the subordinate roles of wives, concubines, sisters, sisters-in-law, cousins, nieces, colleagues or business associates, without highlighting their individual contributions. One of the reasons advanced for this seeming neglect of the female character in literature is the late entry of the female African novelist or dramatist. Supporting this view, Eustace Palmer (1983:38) reveals that before the entry of the female writer, "the presentation of woman in the African novel..." was left " to male voices" whose interest "in African womanhood... has had to take second place to numerous other concerns" (38) In consonance with this idea, Femi Ojo-Ade (1983:158) asserts that "African Literature is a male-created, male-oriented, chauvinistic art." Thus the female species, in these early works of fiction, was consciously portrayed in passive roles through the subjective vision of men. The picture that emerged had tended to follow the cultural paradigms of the *virtuous woman* whom traditional Africa designates in symbols of passivity, gracefulness and humility.

Cultural constructs are in the main man-made, but conventions are bound to change with changing times. Change as a phenomenon has often met with resentment and/or resistance from conservative elements; hence, phenomenal changes have often had to follow the explosive or revolutionary path on the part of the visionary nonconformists. Like everything else, the image of womanhood has continued to transform from one generation to the other and today there exist varying schools, positions, claims and counter-claims on

the feminine question. The seminal school of thought in this regard is the feminist school, which acknowledges that the image of womanhood today has gone beyond the early notions reflected in Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Ocol* earlier cited. This has necessitated a major shift in the perception of the feminine image both in literature and social reality. In drama, a new crop of feminists (both male and female) have emerged. This group feels strongly that there is a dearth of literature articulating the social reality of the African woman in a rapidly changing world, and has thus set forth to articulate her new image through the creation of appropriate stage icons.

The feminist dramatists, the insurgent offspring of the feminist movement, therefore take it upon themselves to propagate the feminist vision. Propelled by a woman-centred ideology, this new crop of dramatists set out to engineer the re-creation of the image of womanhood in dramaturgy. The feminist dramatist, in embarking on a gender-powered activism develops a flagrant bias for positive female portrayal in dramatic literature, fostering in the process, a greater understanding of feminine sensibilities and realities. These efforts, also strongly supported by very articulate voices in the feminist domain such as Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Toril Moi, Mabel Evwierhoma, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie and Julie Okoh, to mention just a few, underscore the currents of the feminist literary tradition which is replete with images of the emancipated, the assertive and the empowered woman. All in all, feminist drama tends to oscillate between the moderate and the extreme, but generally inclined to egalitarian precepts and vehemently opposed to male hegemony in all its ramifications. Tess Onwueme's works tend to follow the more radical or revolutionary approach, reflected in such plays as *The Broken Calabash* and *The Reign of Wazobia*, and climaxing in her *Go Tell it to Women.*

From inception feminism sets forth as an aberrant voice, with a rebellious undertone. In the same *Song of Ocol* in which the conventional image of the woman is portrayed, the Ugandan poet, Okot p'Bitek, makes radical prescriptions for the liberation of the African woman. Employing the word *pot* as imagery for "taboos", which, according to him, "are chains around the neck" (133) he reveals that the new African woman must "burst", "break into

pieces", "shatter" and "smash those pots" possibly with a "hammer"! Thus, he galvanises her into action in the following words:

Sister
Woman of Acoliland
Throw down that pot
With its water;
Let it break into pieces
Let the water cool
The thirsty earth;

It is taboo
To throw down water pots
With water in them,
But taboos must be broken,
Taboos are chains
Around the neck,
Chains of slavery;

Shatter that pot,
Shatter taboos, customs,
Traditions...

Listen
My sister from Ankole
And you from Ruanda
And Burundi

Here's a hammer
Smash those pots
Of rotten milk
Burst open the door
Come forth into daylight

Beat up that old woman
Who pumps you full of milk
(131-133)

The *pot* and the *old woman*, here representing taboos and one who upholds archaic customs respectively, have to be hammered into pieces or beaten to submission so as to "burst open the door" of convention, and enable the hitherto confined African woman to "come forth into daylight". Daylight here is suggestive of enlightenment (education, reorientation) which in Okot p'Bitek's view she can only access by escaping the insinuated darkness (ignorance, naivety) forced upon her by the jammed *door*. Several

years later, Tess Onwueme, our new era female dramatist, heeds Okot p'Bitek's call for the new African woman, in the fictional characters of her revolutionary plays, two of which are being focused upon in this paper. **Ona** in *Broken Calabash* and **Wazobia** in *The Reign of Wazobia,* are presented as new African women, empowered by education and a reorientation brought about by modern trends. Like **Titubi,** in Osofisan's *Morountodun*, they are depicted as courageous and determined, capable of operating in spheres hitherto denied their kind. For this reason, they are liked or disliked by those who share or do not share their dreams.

A critical study of all three characters chosen for this exercise reveals that each of them, as a typical Nigerian character, responds to the social setting to which she belongs. Thus, by the parameter of ethnic membership, they are expected, like everyone else in such circumstances, to adhere to the cultural norms of their social backgrounds. Long standing habits, conventions and cultural norms tend to run deep; hence, any attempt to effect a change often meets with stiff opposition. Nevertheless, not all cultural practices can stand the test of time, particularly practices whose foundations have been found to be defective with the passage of time. Standards and values do change and so do outmoded cultural practices regardless of opposition. Being thus in a continuous state of flux, change remains a permanent feature of every society. This study seeks to establish the motivating cultural imperatives that serve as the driving force of each protagonist who, in turn and on the basis of some ideals pursued, rise up to the challenge of instituting a change. For Ona, the protagonist in Tess Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*, the time has come to renounce the concept of **Idegbe:** a girl-child who is an only child or the firstborn among a chain of girls, on whom custom thrusts the duty to bear children *in her father's name*, although through other men to whom she is not expected to be married. As an undergraduate and an enlightened member of the modern Nigerian society, she immediately sees the double standard in society denouncing prostitution on the one hand, and on the other, encouraging the concept of *Idegbe* which permits the woman to give in to any man that comes her way in her desperation for male children to continue her paternal lineage. Having also fallen in love with Diaku, in a world where match-making has become old fashioned, she also finds appalling her father's rejection of her lover

which she sees as an infringement on her personal freedom. Again, to Ona, the idea of Diaku being an *osu*: an outcast whose blood would contaminate her family's 'freeborn' blood were she to marry him, is even more outrageous. Had she accepted the duty of being an Idegbe, would it have mattered if it is a Diaku (an *osu*) that impregnates her? More importantly, Ona, from a larger perspective, sees the hypocrisy in a repressive patriarchal culture at play. Hers is a society that repudiates the girl-child where sons are available; so her momentary significance within the family results from the absence of the 'essential sex'. Society, thus, chooses to prostitute her person and endanger her reputation for a selfish end, urging her to sacrifice her virtue on the altar of patriarchy.

In rising to the challenge to swivel things around, Ona, in a wilful exercise of courage, denounces all and sundry. Her father, Eloke Jide Onwa Rapu, breaks the calabash of wine brought by Diaku's people, to demonstrate his violent objection to the proposed union. This act which is a taboo, patently recalls the poem of Okot p'Bitek in which he prescribes an iconoclastic step in breaking down the age long barriers. The climax of breaking the calabash takes Ona to a point of no return, and she does everything to uphold her personal convictions. Symbolically therefore, the title of the play, *The Broken Calabash*, becomes an apt metaphor for the ushering in of a new era in line with Okot p'Bitek's vision. Ona, determined to take a swipe on the repressive society, skilfully plans her revenge. To serve society its own bitter pill therefore, she plans a subterfuge, concocting the story in which she claims her own father had impregnated her! This is a taboo and society does not spare victims of such a scandal. Rapu, unable to get his daughter to absolve him, is driven to commit suicide. One may see this as treacherous on the part of a daughter, but how would one plead for the conniving father of an *idegbe* who has, by that act, chosen to sacrifice a daughter's whole world for his own selfish gratification? Be that as it may, Ona's action does bring out the gravity of imposing the concept of *idegbe* on a girl-child victim thrust with the duty to regenerate the lineage that is threatened by extinction. As an *idegbe* the image conjured in a *daughter bearing children for her father* smacks of incest and sexual immorality. In spite of the negative aspects of her action, Ona succeeds in invoking the horrendous vision of incest to

drive home the point about the evil that trails the concept of *idegbe* and their implications for the girl-child.

Wazobia, in a similar vein. represents the changing image of the sophisticated woman of the New Age – well informed, assertive, emancipated, daring and prepared at all costs to follow her dreams. Again, like Ona, she derives her significance from the death-imposed absence of the king, whose recent demise has thrown the entire Illa community into mourning. In line with the practice of the community, the gods are consulted and Wazobia is appointed a surrogate regent to hold brief for the meantime. Her manifesto seeks to reinvent and glamorize the feminine image to the chagrin of the men folk in the play and this consequently leads to a number of conflicts and upheavals. To effectively operate in the position of 'king', Wazobia's image has to transcend her femininity, giving her a larger than life social construct and the concomitant leverage to carry out bold and decisive reforms. Similarly, by superimposition, Femi Osofisan infuses the larger than life image of the legendary Moremi on Titubi his female protagonist in *Morountodun.* Thus goaded by the Moremi vision, Titubi actualises her dream to reform the social order, and restore peace and order to the community where the warring men folk have failed. This is reminiscent of Moremi's monumental action of saving her people from perpetual attack and servitude to their marauding neighbours. Exploring, therefore, Titubi's courageous and assertive disposition, Osofisan skilfully manoeuvres the character into displaying amazing feats of valour and heroism, thus elevating the feminine image.

Basically, the three characters discussed above share traits and characteristic features that identify them as belonging to a group of heroic women, set to re-define the place of the woman in the society. The study of the individual female protagonist in each of the select plays has drawn attention to the role played by tradition or custom in the relegation and subjugation of the feminine gender over the years. For instance, the woman who succumbs to being made an *idegbe* would inevitably:

- give up of her freedom to love and marry decently
- give up of her dignity and personal respect
- breed a chain of 'fatherless' children, and

- live with the terrible image of a prostitute stamped on her person.

What reason is tenable enough to inflict such acts of injustice on a woman? Would it not amount to double standards if the same society that creates the *idegbe* turns around to disparage her? Similarly '*osu*', the outcast, cannot marry freely and so faces the same kind of problems listed above. Again, the divine choice of Wazobia, a female, to preside as regent sends a glaring signal that the idea of keeping the woman subjugated is a socially imposed attitude and a corollary of patriarchy. Wazobia, whose name is a contraction of the words for 'come' ('wa', 'zo' and 'bia') in the three major indigenous languages of Nigeria (Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, respectively), seizes the opportunity of her regency to reveal the inherent capability of the Nigerian woman, who has suffered long years of neglect and repression.

In summation, this study advocates the conscious entrenchment of parity in the rating of both sexes without discrimination, and a radical review of all socio-cultural constructs that are pointedly inimical to general human progress. This action will be pivotal to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) on the equality of gender in every society. Beyond the issue of parity between the sexes, a critical self examination of that kind affords each society the benefits of a realistic reappraisal and re-evaluation of itself and the eradication of all outmoded principles and customs to ensure rapid development. For the dynamism of culture to be appreciated, it has to develop parameters for exorcising anachronistic elements likely to impede human progress. Indeed, the way forward toward achieving the visions of the MDGs, especially with regard to gender equity, is for a radical re-appraisal of the female question, through deconstructing all negative social constructs inimical to general social advancement. This would create the congenial atmosphere needed for the harmonious co-existence of the sexes, and a recognition of the complementary nature of their being, in the overall interest of social, political and economic progress of the human society. To this end, more plays are required of Nigerian dramatists, in particular, and African dramatists, in general, to give vent to the global movement towards social harmony and sexual equality.

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