

Enemies of their Own: Rethinking Feminism in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*

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Abstract— *The belief that women secretly hate other women is one with a long history in humanity especially in the African context. Avarice suspicion and competition abound in the relationship among the female race. The vibrancy which accosted African gender studies stimulates a closer appraisal of the varying opinions of the females as they inclined to the popular concept of feminism. This paper therefore seeks to interrogate the diversified opinions of the supposed unity in understanding the concept of feminism as it echoes from several female critics cum writers. Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* is used to explore this assertion. Such are clear evidences of divergences in the physical, spiritual, social and intellectual dispositions of women which call for reflections.*

Keywords— *Zulu Sofola, *Wedlock of the Gods*.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of feminism came as a result of the waves which triggered off with Mary Wellstonecraft Godwin's publication of her work. *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792 in England where she explores the intimidations and subjugations meted by men on women. Thenceforth, it underwent a lot of transformations with such women like Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth C. Stanton's fight for women suffrage until women won the right to vote in 1928. The spark of feminism continued unabatedly following different dimensions through various continents.

Feminism, therefore, is a diverse collection of social theories, political movements and moral philosophies, largely motivated by or concerning the experiences of women, especially in terms of their social, political and economic situation. As a social movement, feminism largely focuses on limiting or eradicating gender inequality and promoting women's rights, interests, and issues in society.

In the African context in general and Nigeria in particular, feminism as Helen Chukwuma deems it necessary to redefine as a context in modern African literature, is a rejection inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks

to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being (ix). This conforms to the lamentations of Ama Ata Aidoo when she bemoans the neglect of the females and their write-ups, thus, a denial of self-assertion as she states:

We were not asking to be hailed as geniuses, it was simply that some African women have written books that have been as good as some of the books written by some of the African male writers, and sometimes better. We wanted to be noticed (516).

What the female writers who are otherwise called feminists tend to portray is self-assertiveness and re-creation of women from the docile subjugated beings to decisive individuals in opposition to their portrayals in male authored literature. This is what Elizabeth Uko examines using feminist critique which exposes patriarchal ideology evident in literature written by men. She suggests that women themselves should be investigated to observe how they perceive themselves and their existence (147).

Flora Nwapa in "Women and Creative Writing in Africa" emphasizes the great need for women identification since men, especially, the authors, fail to recognize them as they played down the powerful role of women in their earlier works which prompted her (Nwapa) to action in her debut novels *Efuru* and *Idu* as she affirms:

In these two, therefore, I tried to debunk the erroneous concept that the husband is the Lord and master and the woman is nothing but his property. I tried to debunk the notion that woman is dependent of her husband. The woman not only holds her own, she is astonishingly independent of her husband. So while some Nigerian male writers failed to see the power base, this strength of character, this independence, I tried in *Efuru* and *Idu* to elevate the woman to her rightful place (528).

She finally advocates for interdependency when she states that "the lives of a man and a woman are interdependent, there must be mutual understanding and respect" (532).

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie in *stiwanism*” battles with the word “feminism” as she tries to expose, with dismay, what some African women are saying about feminism in Africa. According to her:

Some quite outstanding women like Buchi Emecheta, say they are not feminists without saying why, others like the Nigerian writer, Flora Nwapa, say they are not feminist, but they are womanists. Bessie Head, says in her post-humous essay collected under the title ‘A Woman Alone’ that in the world of the intellect where she functions as a writer and an intellectual, feminism is not necessary because the world of the intellect is neither male nor female (548).

Leslie frowns at Head’s declaration and she calls it a false consciousness expression.

In Buchi Emecheta’s article “Feminism with a small ‘f’”, Emecheta pretends about her being acknowledged as a feminist, when she states:

I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know

I did not know that by doing so I was going to be called a feminist. But if I

am now a feminist, then I am an African feminist with a small ‘f’ (553).

Could it be that feminists are really ignorant of the concept or just trying to deny the ideology they have been clamouring to be identified with? For Leslie, she advocates not for feminism but *stiwanism*, emphasizing the word as a negative one. She states:

The word “feminism” itself seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men....Be a *stiwani*. I am a *Stiwani*. (549)

The question remains, are these female writers confused about what they try to portray? No wonder Charles Nnolim in “A House Divided” observes and prophesies that:

The contours of the feminist literary landscape in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, present a panorama of undulating topography. It is a house divided against itself and at present looks discomfiting like the leaning tower of Pisa (250).

He goes further to analyze different categories of feminists and their belief as regards their commitment to the concept. They truly vary, which ordinarily should not be so.

Majority of the female writers usually show concern for their heroines and other female characters in their works who struggle to exist within the confines of their patriarchal society, but *Wedlock of the Gods* by Zulu Sofola is a scathing attack on the feminist ideas that men in the traditional African society integrate suffering on *women* rather, she tries to state that the so called women suffering, especially by widows, are meted out not be men but women.

An exaltation of the female traits, especially the heroines is no doubt expected in the characters of ‘Ogwoma’ and Odibei, but the reverse is the case in the work of Sofola, a female writer. No wonder she is grouped by Nnolim under “sheer reactionaries and fence sitters” under whom the cause of feminists suffer. The character of Odibei in the play fully conforms to Elizabeth Ako’s proclamation that some women are portrayed not only as victims of patriarchal dominance but equally as participants in the process of relegation and segregation in male dominated societies.

She emphasizes that such position, rather than simply justify patriarchal attitudes points out as well to the careless and unserious attitude of women in matters concerning their individual identity and their place and role in their communities.

Wedlock of the Gods

Wedlock of the Gods is a tragic drama that its roots in the ritual of death and mourning and the entanglement of a woman in the traditional set-up that destroys her.

A young girl, Ogwoma, deeply in love with her young lover, Uloko, is given away in marriage to a man who she neither knows nor loves, because her parents are in desperate need of the dowry to cure her sick brother. When the new husband dies unexpectedly, the events take on a new twist. The young girl Ogwoma is expected to mourn her husband for three months, and then marry her dead husband’s brother according to traditional stipulations, but she defies the customs, gives in to the yearnings of her heart desire and gets pregnant for Uloko, her beloved, even before the mourning period is over and all hell is let loose, as her mother-in-law Odibei, with her diabolic and magical powers swears to avenge her son’s death, as she believes that he died out of Ogwoma’s unfaithfulness. This is

according to her discussion with Otubo, her neighbour when Odibei searches Ogwoma's house in her absence.

OTUBO: (digusted) what are you looking for?

ODIBEI: I am looking for the medicine she used

OTUBO: What if there is no medicine

ODIBEI: Then it is her harlotry that killed my son (P.6).

It therefore highlights the degree of suspicion the mother-in-law has on her daughter-in-law, which is eventually proved with Ogwoma's pregnancy for her beloved, and his over boldness to claim what he believes rightfully belongs to him, which was rudely snatched from him due to his wretchedness.

The play takes a tragic turn at Odibei's determination to take Ogwoma's life which she actually does with her magical powers as she hypnotizes Ogwoma to do her biddings. She conjures and compels her to plead guilty to the offence she committed and subsequently dies after drinking the poisoned liquid prepared and kept for her by Odibei herself. Even the magical summoning incantations she uses emphasizes that she has been in deep membership of the diabolic group. It goes thus:

ODIBEI: My God, the worse is done!
Ogwoma walks on the path that reeks with blood. (she picks up the snail shell and blows the powder). Let me feel your power! (she puts it down, looks directly into the pot filled with smoke and speaks directly into it. She shakes the gourd at appropriate intervals). The vulture does not see the corpse and resist it, the dog does not see human dung and resist it; the antelope does not hear its death music and refuse to dance;

Ogwoma cannot hear your call and refuse to answer; bring her here!

Lead her to me;

Bring her here not knowing what she is doing!

Lead her and make her do whatever I bid!

Ogwoma, your soul is summoned!

(Ogwoma appears in a trance and walks towards Odibei)

Your soul is wanted;

Come, come and not look back!

Come and answer your call!

Come and not look back.

(Ogwoma reaches her and stops)

(Still in a trance; speaking

OGWOMA:
slowly) I am here!

ODIBEI: That is good. Go to your house, open the door and enter. Behind your water pot is another small pot. Open it and say into it once "I have done what the land forbids", cup your hand and drink from the pot with your hand thrice saying before each, drink, "I have done what the land forbids". Let me perish, "let my blood appease the disgraced spirit of my husband. Close the pot and wait for whatever comes. Is that clear?

OGWOMA: It is clear

ODIBEI: Good. Go now and do everything

OGWOMA: I will do everything (P.52-53)

The above is more or less no conversation because one is spiritually manipulating the other.

Sheer wicked practice by a woman to a fellow woman. Although Uloko avenges her death by killing Odibei, but he commits suicide thereafter; blood for blood.

It is said that most female writers in the bid to emphasize the relevance of women fail to observe the inherent negative traits of women that they usually show concern for their heroines, but Sofola is no such writer. Her portrayal of the female characters of Ogwoma and Odibei show no attachment to female gender. One is expected to show mercy for Ogwoma at the traditional subjugation she undergoes in the play, and so averts the cruel fate that awaits her. Her ordeal is mentioned by Ogwoma herself when she asks Anwasia her friend:

OGWOMA: What have I done to them? I have fought for the past four years to marry the man I

love, but these people will not let it be. I was tied and whipped along the road to Adigwu. Now that God has freed me, they still say I am his brother's wife.

(P.21)

Her friend's response is an emphatical statement of the Igbo woman in the face of tradition as it relays women as pieces of objects for sale. She responds:

ANWASIA: Listen Ogwoma, a friend must always be honest and truthful. It is a common thing, that when a man dies his brother takes his wife. This is what our people do. Everyone knows that (P.21).

She has no doubt, resigned to fate at the dictates of patriarchy. This situation is what G.T Basden

affirms heartily as normal in his assertion that:

Women have but few rights in any circumstances and can only hold such property as their lords' permit. There is no grumbling against their lot; they accept the situation as their grandmother did before them and, taking affairs philosophically, they manage to live fairly contentedly (P.88).

This type of affirmation is what the likes of Uduopegeme J. Yakubu vehemently opposes as she frowns that such important subject like female sexuality is hardly given the attention it desires

by female writers. This makes her to assertively state that various female writers (like Sofola as we have seen) pander to the dictates of patriarchal epistemologies in the sphere of sexuality by their lack of capacity or interests in creating female characters whose sexuality are independent.

She beckons on the Nigerian female writers to reconstruct woman's sexuality in an

overwhelming atmosphere of real freedom and gender equality. Invariably, for Yakubu,

Ogwoma does what she should not have been crucified for, after all; she was dragged like a dog, whipped along the road to the house of Adizua- What an inhuman treatment!

Yakubu indicts female writers who have conceptualized freedom for Nigerian women through various approaches that are literarily and socially realistic, yet when it concerns women's sexuality issue; they operate within the exclusive ambience of patriarchal heterosexual perscriptions, whether conservative or liberal. She boldly emphasizes;

By sexual liberation here is meant the freedom to define the agency by which woman chooses to accomplish whatever sexual pleasures she desires. Such pleasures could include heterosexual one so long as her rights and independence can be adequately asserted. It is important to observe that within family institutions in Nigeria, married woman who sleeps with any man apart from her husband is shamed, ridiculed and ostracized. But a married man is 'free' to sleep with as many women as possible (in spite of HIV/AIDS and all the STD's in town), have children outside the home and still be hailed as a hero in the community. This is an illustration of the patriarchal foundation of hetero-sexuality in Nigeria. It is a system which should be questioned if there is any genuine concern for female sexual liberation.

The doors to sexual discourse and practice cannot be shut after the admittance of the patriarchy-approved modes of hetero-sexuality. Female sexual liberation means that women should be able to explore the vistas of sexual desire and intimacy if, when, where, how and as they wish to choose. It is a smirking expression of double stands to preach liberation only to the extent that it suits the whims and ego of male chauvinists (159-160).

Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (500-501) confirms that women worth more and are better regarded in their father's home more than in their husbands, for their own lineage offers them greater status than elsewhere. She states:

The woman as daughter or sister has greater status and rights in her lineage. Married, she becomes a possession, voiceless and often rightless in her husband's family, except for what accrues to her through her children. But Helen Chukwuma negates that notion and rather opines that marriage remains the ultimate for women who are trained from their infancy to realize themselves and their true worth outside themselves. For her:

A woman's greatest aspiration is finding a mate and thereafter, bearing children. Every other thing is secondary: education, a career, material wealth, social acclaim. All these are subsumed to marriage and motherhood.

In discussing Buchi Emecheta who appears to be concerned with criticizing a marriage system which does not protect the interest of woman (as that of man) when the bride price connotatively implies colonization of the woman, Helen Chukwuma emphasizes further that the true test of woman remains the marriage institution where every married woman fights out her survival as an Individual and attains a status acclaimed by society and fulfills her biological need of procreation and companionship.

This belief by Helen Chukwuma is highly opposed by Yakubu, who insists that Helen's assertion that marriage is the true test of the woman should be contested, otherwise, "women are perpetually doomed" (163). She emphatically adds that female writers like Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, Ifeoma Okoye and several others present the idea that Nigerian female writers cannot re-create women outside hetero-sexuality and marriage and so seem to corroborate the patriarchal myth that speaks to men's sense of bloated importance. She concludes stating that:

A woman does not have to marry or have children before she becomes happy or lives a fulfilling life. Writers must explore possibilities. Female writers, especially, must not be afraid of upturning culture or touching what patriarchal society and its religious institutions regard as taboo (164).

For her therefore, double standard cannot be erected for men and supported by women in the

name of culture, religion or tradition.

Catherine Acholonu promptly corrects the impression that some women writers misunderstood about the concept of feminism which does the harm of diminishing the numbers of readers and audience they attract to their detriment. She explains that feminism is not synonymous with violent confrontation or militancy; rather it should calmly expose the study of women's psyche, behavioral characteristics, mentality and history. She finally advises that:

Women writers must be able to strike a balance between outright aggressive radicalism and finding a hologrammatic approach, dynamically organic approach to writing that will encourage mutual understanding co-operation and acceptance among sexes, rather than emphasize the area that divide us in a manner that divides us even further to the extent that it compromises our readership (93).

All the mentioned above are female writers, in the same course of feminism but varying degrees of ideologies emphatically stating non-conformity of ideas.

Charles Nnolim (217) identifies the fact that African feminism draws an arc that is most disquieting in its implications. He further intimates further that 'Some African feminists are dancing furious step, and the feminists drums have gone mad' (46). As Chibueze Orie rightly quotes him, "The Concept of Feminism... has a worm that squirms at its core and is maggot-ridden by its human condition, because the dilemma of the feminist is the dilemma of the proverbial chichidodo (157).

Over the years, most gender studies have been on the perceived discrimination against women as spearheaded by men. Women have always been seen as the victim of gender discrimination but a critical appraisal of the relationship between women in the natural context shows that women are rivals of one another. When feminism emerged in Africa, it was received with a

mixed feeling. Many African women are opposed to its radicalism, which runs counter to African cultural practices. Some of the women see it as a disorder, a deviation, an extremism associated with misguided frustrated or disgruntled women. Actually this is not what feminism should be all about. In its most objective form, feminism according to Chukwuma (1994) is, "... a reaction to such stereotypes of women which deny them a positive identity" (.ix). For Chukwuma, women conditioning in Africa is the greatest barrier towards a fulfilment of self. This she says is seen in the religious, socio-cultural and economic life of women. The assertiveness and various divisions of feminism approaches are indications of the in depth divisions among the women in the feminists struggle and a closer study, identification and unification of the ideal concept for general integration will prevent further disintegration.

Conclusion

Women are really their own enemies because the claim that women writers have particularly been outstanding in defending their sex against patriarchal subjugations may not be entirely true. This is because some of them have shown total disagreement amongst themselves as discussed

earlier. Gloria Chukwukere states that:

For society to change, female writers insist that external revolution must be accomplished by the woman's personal growth. Women may be the victims of male insensitivity and social intransigence, but often, they are also shown to be victims of their own shortcoming (313-314).

That is exemplified in the play, *Wedlock of the Gods*, where the author presents her female characters as the architect of their own doom, especially, in the characters of Ogwoma and Odibei.

In recognition of the fact that women's liberation movement tries to remove the impression that

women are perpetually to play the second fiddle and its fight against modern attempts to keep the women at the margins of society and rouse her from the impotence of accepting patriarchy, it is also pertinent that women should equally realize that they constitute a huge chunk of their debased-ness by their integral hatred of themselves. A glaring example is the age long war between mothers and their daughters in-law, in the traditional igbo society, as ex-rayed in the play of study, which has not been resolved up till today and which seems to linger till eternity. Educated or not, women in the world over have bitterness which fans into flames whenever they clash. This is confirmed by Knappert (48) when prophet Musa tells the widower that "women create bitterness both when they are alive and when they are dead". Women in general, and female writers in particular should re-assert what they believe and re-acclaim uniformity for the realization of their common goal.

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