

DRAMATISING THE VOICE OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN FROM THE PRIVATE TO THE PUBLIC SPHERE: A READING OF FEMI OSOFISAN'S *MOROUNTODUN*

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ABSTRACT

There has been an endemic dominance of the masculine character in the public sphere of the theatre, whereas, for more than seven centuries, both male and female characters have featured in the dramatic space of the theatre both in the West and in Africa respectively. This dominance is not only seen in the gender of playwrights, but also in the negative status giving to female characters in plays. This paper seeks to advocate that, projecting the woman figure in plays by given them a voice as domestic and traditional iconic characters can elevate the woman status beyond the present marginalised sphere accorded her in the public sphere of African theatre. This research investigates the characters of Titubi and Alhaja Kabirat in Femi Osofisan MOROUNTODUN as iconic archetypes that projects the public status of women from the 'domesticated to the heroin' and submits that a proliferation of archetypal characterisation of this nature is capable of increasing the status of women by lending a voice to a global debate through the public sphere of the theatre

Keywords: Public Sphere, Dramatic, Theatre, Domesticated.

Introduction

In Africa, before the inception of western education, there was a political structure in place that strived on oral tradition. For the sake of continuity folklore, legendary tales and ritualistic performances were instruments for mass enlightenment as well as tools for social-cultural emancipation and a medium for social change through entertainment. In

the pre-colonial Africa community, to be accepted into the public sphere included one's ability to have one or more skills in both the religious and social life of the community. This was important because it was through these activities members of the society were groomed to understand the polity, economic and spiritual life of the people. With these performances from which African theatre evolved, socio-political reform strategies were discussed with lasting solutions proffered. In the pre-colonial society, women were on the center stage as the greatest custodians of traditional norms and values and so, automatically were seen as very important in national life and development of the society. Kenechukwu Igweonu supports this view when he declares "indigenous African societies offer ample recognition to women. This is evidence in the importance and relevance attached to feminine roles within tradition" (2007:52). Shannon Jackson also lays credence to this fact by submitting that

As long as tradition of feminist theory tells us, Public women bear the burden of standing in the communities to whom they are speaking in a way that exceeds and shows the conventions of representative sense of the term, in political and performance sense of the term (2003:693).

What we call African drama/theatre today developed from a combination of our traditional performance form and the western performance form brought to us by our colonialist. As refined as it is today, African theatre is still as vital in commenting on national issues as much as it has been in the past. The only difference between what we had before and what we have now is in the area of male dominance and patriarchal ideologies in the every aspect. And this range from playwrights to the portrayal of dominant characters both in text and on stage. This patriarchal dominance however is not surprising since from the inception of western education in Africa the male species were favoured more than the fairer sex. As time progressed, the woman became less and less favoured, sidelined in the society but became good only for those gendered roles prescribed to her by virtue of her natural delineation. This antecedence is similar to what has been experienced in the theatre, especially with the shift of formal education from the

traditional to the western mode. The role of traditional oral performances which was mostly the preserve of the African woman shifted from the warmth of the fire place to the prestigious theatre platform of the proscenium and all other latest manifestations of it.

The first set of playwrights to emerge in the public sphere of the theatre, had in their ideologies projections of a new African state devoid of western manipulations; the eradication of corruption from a smilingly destroyed society and a fruitless struggle for identity between the culture of both worlds. In trying to attain this struggle, their male characters were mostly deified as exemplary icons, while female characters were simply left at the background to make up character list; to act as comic relief or to further the plot of their plays. Examples of plays in this category are Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*, *A Dance of the Forest*, *The swamp Dwellers*, *Madmen and Specialist*, *The Road etc.* In these plays, we have prominent female characters that were portrayed even stronger than some male characters. But there seems to a conscious effort by this playwright to portray these women though as strong characters but in roles that is more derogatory than popular. For instance, even though a strong political character, Segi is portrayed as a mere prostitute in *Kongi's Harvest* and not as a character with strong moral standing worthy of emulation. Decrying this stance by African playwrights Victor Ukaegbu laments that:

Although African women are prominent in ritual performance, especially when cast in the service of community and men, this prominence has not been used as a platform for their emergence on the political stage as many writers have done with men. (2007:8)

In her paper titled "Nigerian Women Playwrights: Beyond the Nobel Prize", Irene Salami quarries Soyinka's remark on the positive portraiture of women in his plays and states that "Soyinka has clearly stated that his use of women in his works is for symbolism and essence" (2006:141). Playwrights after Soyinka and even his contemporaries according to Irene Salami, followed the blazing trail of women representation he set in his works especially after the Nobel Prize. She states that

For the men, the old-boy network opened up literary spaces for them, elevating the male subjects above the female. This obvious lack is responsible for the uncomplimentary construction of negative female identity by some male writers who dominate the seen. (2006:124)

Although we have had very few female playwrights from inception, which includes Zulu Sofola, Tess Onweme, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo etc., their numbers, compared with those of their male counterpart succeeded in drowning their small still voices in trying to elevate the status of women by their portraiture. It should be noted that even though the list of playwrights mentioned above chiefly consist of female playwrights, not all of them portrayed women in the kind of positive light capable of lending women the kind of position we are here projecting for them in the Public Sphere. While Zulu Sofola's plays has been applauded as having feminist ideological tendencies of "placing women at the center of her narratives, by which means she is able to articulate and (re-present the importance of women in indigenous traditional Africa most of which has been eroded through transculturation...." (Kenechukwu, 2007:52) Other women playwrights for instance, Efua Sutherland has not contributed much in this regard. Victor Ukaegbu while commenting on *The Marriage of Anansewa* in "... The Gendered Misinterpretation of Women" he observes that Sutherland

In forgoing the opportunity to interrogate the nature of marriage and a woman's place in it, Sutherland follows the familiar path of surrender to costume and convention that sustains men's domination of women. This is unfortunate given the tremendous capacities that Ananse archetype, the marriage institution and story telling theatre offer as sites for gender debate. (2007:10)

A combination of the tri-dimensional issues of "archetype, marriage institution and storytelling theatre" in *The Marriage of Anansewa*, is capable of opening up a remarkable

platform for redefining the true essence of marriage in the theatre of storytelling with the aim of redefining the kind of supportive roles fathers should play in an institution as important as marriage, rather than manipulating it to suit their patriarchal and egoistic bloating as displayed in the portrayal of Ananse. Victor Ukaegbu went further to explain that:

Whatever else the play intended, its handling of gender relationships perpetuates the myth about women in Africa lacking the enthusiasm for radical feminism. The play suggests a pattern of dependency on men that is hard to ignore, yet whenever they choose, African women have independently risen to heroism. (2007:10)

The issue of heroism has been a constant discuss in the plays of later African feminist playwrights. Weather taking a leaf from historical characters or constructing one to serve the purpose of projecting contemporary women's voice in discussing issues of national importance, these later playwrights amongst whom is Irene Salami has in her plays re-situated heroic characters from the past into contemporary discuss as seen in *More Than Dancing*, *Emotan*, and *The Queen Sisters*. The discussion of positive gendered issues however has from the forgoing been discovered not to be the preserve of women playwright as seen in the cases cited above of Zulu Sofola, Efua Sutherland, and Irene Salami. Once in a while, we come across male playwrights who have used the public sphere of the theatre to demonstrate their recognition of the power woman has always and still wields in the society. Queen *Amina of Zazzau* by Wale Ogunyemi, *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* By Ola Rotimi, *Poison* By Chukwuma Okoye, *The Last Heroes* by Sam Ukala are some example of such plays that have helped discuss famine issues in positive lights even though from patriarchal perspectives.

Iconic Archetype in *Spellbound*

In *Spellbound*, Janet is a caught between two tradition and two lives. She is a European by birth and an African by marriage. Her dual nationality is brought to a challenging duel

with the clash of the African traditional laws and the legal system that dominate the daily life of the ordinary European woman in a quest for justices.

In *Morountodun* by Femi Osofisan, the issue of heroism though seen from the male perspective x-rays a feminine world view that contracts the contemporary ‘domesticated’¹ and the legendary heroic in a battle of self actualization thereby given the woman an opportunity to synthesize her abilities in liberalizing the poor she is socially and economically pitched against

Femi Osofisan in this play down plays the political aristocratic Alhaja Kabirat from the lofty height in a seemingly public sphere where she and her archetypes in the society are commonly found, to a private sphere of immobility where her voice and power is subjected by the whim and caprice of the superintendent of police who assumes a patriarchal ego as he listens to the fears of Alahaja Kabirat as replete with the original status of the African man/woman relationship as follows:

Alhaja: I say I want news of my Daughter!
Superintendent: I heard you Alhaja.
Alhaja: What has happened to her?
I assure you we’re trying our best to find out.
Alhaja: That is not enough! Two weeks you said. Only two weeks. And now its five weeks since she left.
Superintendent: I know.
Alhaja: and I have been rotting away in the Hotel....
Superintendent: You’re not resting enough?
Alhaja: I don’t need rest!...(1999:55)

We see that despite her political powers and connections; her economic achievements and social status in the society, her powers could be cubed by that of a man whom she is

¹ The normal gendered role the woman is seen in by the society are those roles that make her good enough for domestic activities. The African man cannot see a woman beyond the eyes of a pet good only for the satisfaction of his desires: to cook, wash, clean the house, have children etc.

ordinarily capable of deposing from the police force. But because in the African society, the primary objective of every mother is to protect and care for her child, she is subdued by the Superintendents egotism for the sole purpose of redeeming her daughter from the clutches of impending danger that may arise if things went wrong. At this point of maternal instinctive love and care, Alahaja Kabirat is disrobed of all form of economic, social and political paraphernalia that she had acquired in the public sphere to a cocooned public sphere whose life-blood is dependant only on the ‘macho-istic’ mercies of the Superintendent of Police.

Unlike her mother, Titubi in this play is portrayed in a dual character personality that saw her at the beginning as rich beautiful and spoilt and at once as bold aggressive and result oriented. This sudden change in her dual nature as provoked by Salami the Superintendent, stimulates an outer ego of strength and inspiration she get from the legendary Moremi an Iconic character she is poised to emulate. Titubi insists on a chance to capture the leaders of the peasants after the Superintendent had given up hope on her and dismissed her as just another woman in the private sphere of the society trying to flex muscles. In her words she halts the Superintendent thus:

Titubi: Salami! [SUPERINTENDENT *stops, without turning round.*] Suppose I do Volunteer?

Superintendent: [*Turns now*] What?

Titubi: I said suppose I offer to fight the peasants?

Superintendent: You’re not through with your pranks for tonight?

Titubi: It’s their leader you’ve not been able to capture, isn’t it? That’s why the war drags on?

Superintendent: Well-

Titubi: I can bring him to you.

Superintendent: You? [Laughs.]...

Titubi: Don’t Laugh Salami.... Two weeks. Give me only two weeks.

Superintendent: This is a dream... (1999:14-15)

At first she acts on impulse and curiosity owing to the sarcastic challenge she receives with from the patriarchal minded Salami. But as Titubi instinctively awakens to the challenge she sees herself owning up to her own challenge and surpassing even her expectation by offering to capture the leader of the peasants. The Superintendent's sarcasm took the better part of his judgment because like every other African man a mere woman/girl is not likely to succeed where men had failed not with the failure of a combined theme of state and federal police force at once. Though Salami halts to listen to her and grant her request to capture his suspect he instinctively let out a shrill "Laugh" that could have awaken Titubi to her senses. But with a renewed determination, she is spurred on by the degrading attitude of the Superintended and insists on re-interpreting history as inspired by the legendary Moremi.

During a rehearsals section suggesting a possible style of capture by her targets, she reenacted the script prepared by the Superintendent to the extent that even before she confronts her fate, she is able to convince her benefactor that she is equal to the task ahead of her. Impressed Salami salutes her brave display at the rehearsals by applauding her thus: "Superintendent: Even I was impressed. If you can remember all that, you'll make it." (1999:30).

As with everybody who is about to plunge head first into the abyss of the unknown, the human factor of fear and uncertainty comes in, the factor of making a concrete final decision of "to be or not to be". At the point of waiting for her captors, Titubi is suddenly overwhelmed by fear and she takes herself through a thorough mental reawakening and preparedness. In her dilemma she is suddenly gripped by anxiety and fear as she weighs her options and takes her decision based on her convictions and inspiration from the legendary Moremi as follows.

Titubi: ... [...*TITUBI walks slowly round the cell*] They are already outside, he said. They'll soon be here! I... I am afraid,

suddenly ... [*Pause*] No! Moremi was not afraid! [*Snaps her fingers backwards over her head*] Fear go away! Doubt and Trembling retreat from me! ... [*She retreats the Moremi necklace from the floor and looks at it.*] She was a woman, like me. And she waited all alone, for the Igbo warriors. All her people went into hiding, but she alone stood and waited. I can feel her heart beating, like mine... But how lucky you were, Moremi! How I envy you! Look I have only the dampness of these walls around me, to wish me goodbye. But you had the scene of the market around you... ah Moremi! What were your thoughts at that lonely moment? Can I read your mind?... Maybe it will strengthen me...(1999:30-31).

In her reverie of thoughts she consoles herself with a realisation that someone else in history had been in position before. Titubi taps into the abbeys of uncertainty with an self willed consolation hinged on the common dilemma she shears with an Icon she represents at another time, but an icon she shears her fears and experience with at a time of uncertainty. Her consolation is innately achieved in her reflection into the past, a past she is willingly and ready to face like the tragic figure she has decided to become, a sacrificial lamb, too willing to redeem her entire race from damnation. At this point of conviction, Titubi transcends into another circle of awareness as she puts on the symbolic Moremi's necklace. She is spirited from her present state to another realm of being where she recaptures the true experience her iconic figure underwent in another lifetime. (Scene five, *Morountodun* 1999.)

As Titubi's will power heightens with her encounter with the past she is rejuvenated and ready to go into the unknown and capture her victim. Her bravery and gallantness is better expressed in the words of the Director as follows:

Director: There she goes then, my friends, bravely walking into danger. Stepping carelessly into the unknown. Ah, women!

My friends the world is strange and women
reign over it. Let us salute their courage.
Their capacity for love. Moremi, I remember
you and I salute you. (1999:40)

The real essence of the space of women in the society is here reiterated by Femi Osofisan through the Director in this play. The woman, despite her seemingly silent space in the public sphere is actually the ace that runs the will of that sphere, in her ability to harness all physical, spiritual and psychological aspect of the society in a balanced space of love to accommodate and enhance societal values. In this play, we see a complete exchange of spheres between the characters of Alhaja Kabirat and Titubi her daughter. For Alhaja Kabirat, her wealth induced position in the public sphere is cowed by the mere prospect of losing her only child, as her ego is further deflated by the Superintendent who represents the societal obstacle that prevents and discourage women from attaining their rightful position in the public sphere. On the other hand Titubi is rather motivated by the same obstacle to a level of inspiration she derived from the deep-rooted womanly nature she possessed inspired by her believe in an Iconic figure she must emulate. And rather than allow herself the privilege of being but down, humiliated and debased by societal or patriarchal sarcasm, she let herself pursue the dream she believes in. Because of her will and dexterity, rather than allow society to reform her, she redeems herself and the society by constructively weighing the sufferings and pains of the peasants as against the blotted injustices of the state against the common man the peasant represents. At the end she is redeemed from her lofty height of affluent and insensibility towards the poor. Titubi did not just emerge from her experience redeemed, but her new self is a reflective of another revolutionary change the society requires for reformation. And unlike the tragic figure that ends up pitifully, she emerges triumphant a better hero, a better woman than her mother can ever be as she paves a way for other women to follow in climbing the ladder of the public sphere.

Conclusively, this paper therefore suggest that in other to redefine the position of women in the public space of the theatre, both Nigerian playwrights, both male and female, should rise up to the challenge of using Iconic characters through drama to lend a voice to

the smilingly diminishing voice of women as exemplified by Alhaja Kabirat in the public sphere to a more vibrant and result oriented voice like that of young Moremi, with positive examples derivable from our cultural past.

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