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## **Drama as a Tool for the Campaign against Female Genital Mutilation: Juliana Okoh's *Edewede* as a Paradigm**

**Nwafor, Friday, Ph.D.**

Department of Theatre and Film Studies

Faculty of Humanities

University of Port Harcourt

Nigeria

[friday.nwafor@uniport.edu.ng](mailto:friday.nwafor@uniport.edu.ng)

+234 8053 277 794

### **Abstract**

This paper is an interrogation of the effect of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), one of the many cultural practices against women in Nigeria without any regard for the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria that clearly forbids human rights violations. Circumcision also negates the ratified Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Nigeria is one of the African Nations that endorsed the charter. The agents of the evil practice and its beneficiaries will be questioned. This researcher adopted content analysis methodology in the study. This interrogation exposed the place of unity amongst women as key in their achieving desired goal. It also discovered that women are their own enemies even though the men benefit from the act. The paper recommended the need for understanding amongst the sexes for a more harmonious society.

### **Introduction**

Former Secretary General of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Salim A. Salim (1990, p. 62) declared that development is a proper goal for any society. But he warned:

A development which is not securely rooted in freedom runs the risk of destroying itself in the long run. It will be a development of materials and human beings. What we must aim at in Africa therefore must be an all-encompassing development. We can achieve this if only we are free and see that the need and indeed the motivation to get involved...The more the people have a stake in the political and economic systems and are part of it, the more they will be committed to its sustenance (Cited by Evwierhoma, 2002).

The place of women in the development of any society cannot be over emphasised. Whatever affects women affects humanity. The woman in the African traditional society had always known their rights and played their roles refusing any form of intimidation. The struggle for equality between the sexes as projected by feminists like Judith Badwick, Bell Hooks, Catherine Markinson, Marilyn French, Catherine Simpson etc in Europe and America was not new in Africa as argued by some critics. Evwierhoma (2002, p. 88) recounted how the Nigerian women new their rights before feminism was propounded. According to her;

Perhaps this is a good time to resort to the examples oral tradition affords us, of women who saved their societies from calamities and ensured the stability of such societies. Some of these are Baba of Karo, Queen Amina of Zaria, Emotan of Benin, Madam Tinubu of Lagos, Moremi of Ile-Ife and other women, who in spite of constraining traditional concepts excelled in their various communities in Nigeria. In recent times too, there are women who have given dignity to the cause of their fellow women without resort to the feminist cause. Some of these are the women of the 1929 Aba Women Riots, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo of Calabar, Hajiya Gambo Sawaba of Zaria among others. Contemporary Nigerian society also on the one hand, boasts of women irrespective of feminism, who exude much dignity and forte.

She explained that not every Nigeria woman is a feminist and all men are not oppressors of women therefore the recent development around the world cannot be attributed to feminism. Black feminism, African womanism, womanism and other concepts by "ethnic minority" women is a proof of the un-work-ability of feminism. The problems of women differ from one society to another and as such feminism is unable to achieve universal solidarity. According to her, one of the factors that hemline women in Nigeria is genital mutilation or female circumcision.

Female circumcision is the removal of part of the female external genitalia, which is composed of the clitoris and the clitoral prepuce, the labia majora (large lips of the vagina) and labia minora (small lips of the vagina) (Arthur 1996, pp 109- 110).

The practice described above is often carried out in Nigeria either during the early age of a girl, or at adolescence or an advanced stage of first pregnancy, depending on the culture. Several reasons have been put forward for the continuous insistence on this evil operation by its perpetrators. The reasons include preservation of virginity, prevention of promiscuity, maintenance of tradition and culture etc. Bature-Uzor (2014, p. 33) asserted that:

Crimes against women are of many facets and are carried out by both sexes. Patriarchy finds accomplices in the older generation of women who are too

willing as custodians of culture to protect that which is entrusted in their care. As custodians of culture, they strive to protect the very customs that one would expect them to oppose as women. Cultural practices such as widowhood rites and female circumcision are spear-headed by women even when women almost all over the world are kicking against such practices.

All these positions are without any regard for the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1979, p. 30) that clearly forbids human rights violations as follows: “every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person and accordingly no person shall be subjected to torture or inhuman degrading treatment”. Circumcision also negates the ratified Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Nigeria is one of the African Nations that endorsed the charter. According to Fran Hosken’s study in 1982 as quoted in Yeseibo (2017) “on the prevalence of FMG in Africa revealed that more than 80 million females have been mutilated in the world. We can imagine the additional number of mutilated females since then till date” (p.124).

The refusal of traditional adherents to realize that circumcision causes retention of urine, haemorrhage, tetanus, genital infection shock and even death if a major vessel is cut, spurred the only female member of the Bayelsa State House of Assembly, Mrs. Ere- Imananagha to present a bill against the scourge that was passed into law in year 2000, the very first year in office of the then legislatures. The question is whether the necessary machinery has been put in place since then to educate the populace effectively.

Obuh (1993, p. 138) explained how the erstwhile Mass Mobilization for Economic Recovery and Social Justice (MAMSER) formed sub-committees of all organs of mass education; one of the agents was drama/theatre, adjudged the most economical mode of expression, which can convey an idea that could easily be accepted as true. Drama’s impact according to Obuh, “is direct and more immediate than any other form of expression”. A, mime according to Ise Osayimwen (1987, pp. 17-18), the illiterate condition of our people makes the theatre artist’s role more meaningful and functional in his application of language, rhythm and gesture. It is the combination of all these that gives the theatre artiste the grace and finesse of fitting into the role of a watchdog of the society. The scourge of apartheid in South Africa may not have come to the knowledge of many Africans without the performance of *Ipitombi* and *Amandla* that forced tears from the eyes of those who saw the productions during the tour, and fought ceaselessly to bring apartheid to an end.

The position of drama is to view and perceive society in its nakedness and proffer solutions where necessary. This explains the position of Clarke (1981, pp. 295-298) that Hubert Ogunde used drama/theatre to address the Colonial Masters and the Lagosians. Ogunde’s *Tiger’s Empire* and *Aso Ebi Craze* contributed immensely to the realization of Nigeria’s independence, and the later play checked the craze for Aso Ebi in Lagos between 1946 and 1972. Juliana Okoh’s *Edwede*, and Ayakoroma’s *A Scar for Life* are dramatic pieces that has contributed to the campaign against female genital mutilation in Nigeria and the former is the subject of this paper.

### **The Plot Structure of Edwede**

Edwede is set in a traditional African society. It portrays the suffering and redemption of the major character, Edwede, and other women from the pangs of tradition and culture.

The beginning of the play is the exposition of Ebikere, Edewede's mother-in-law, doing everything to convince Oseme, her only surviving granddaughter, on the importance of female circumcision. This immediately leads to the beginning of the crisis in the play as Edewede decrees that she will never lose her child to circumcision again. Ebikere storms out swearing that Oseme must be circumcised.

Incidentally, Odia, Edewede's Husband, on the grounds of tradition, supports Ebikere's position and Edewede is caught in between saving her only surviving daughter and her husband. She is in a dilemma as both of them deserve equal commitment. She finally decides to fight the evil tradition by educating her fellow women with the help of her friend Eriala, a matron resident in the nearby village.

The result of the enlightenment is the decision by the women never to allow the act again. Consequent upon this decision, Edewede is repudiated by the elders but the entire women in the community join her in solidarity leaving every duty at home for their husbands. Finally, the husbands succumb to the demand of the women to recall Edewede when they could not face the difficulties of running their homes alone.

Worthy of note is Juliana Okoh's masterful use of flashbacks in her narratives, making the story more recognizable and interesting. Again, her consistency in maintaining the struggle for "women emancipation" in almost all her plays cannot but be worthy of appraisal by all especially the women themselves.

#### **Edewede as a Campaign against Female Genital Mutilation**

From the plot structure, it has been noted that the play starts graphically with Ebikere explaining the benefits of female circumcision to her grandchild, Oseme. It ranges from being a mark of growth from childhood to womanhood, an occasion for the young girl to receive gifts from her parents as she never did, and also a period of merry making among the girls in the camp. In spite of the girl's protest out of fear of death, as she still remembered how her younger sister died, her grandmother continues.

EBIKERE: The peanut is very delicate. It is a source of confusion, impurity and imperfection. So, during the initiation, it is carved out of its pod. And the girls are taught about the taboos of our land. They are fortified for their future roles of wife and mothers (p. 5).

Just as this is on, Edewede, who had been listening, unnoticed, could not hold back herself any longer, and bursts out with the bitter truth the mother-in-law is shying away from:

EDEWEDE: What about those girls who never returns to the village and are never mourned after bleeding to death? Regarded as sacrifice, they are left for vultures to feed on. Tell her about those who never live long to see their wifehood and motherhood because of the infection contracted during the operation. Go on, tell her about all of them (p. 6).

The revelation of this secret nobody ever talked about starts a heated quarrel. Arguing on who between them is more knowledgeable on the subject of circumcision, the mother-in-law of course does not fail to speak in parables, when she tries to clinch the argument by noting that "a young person can have fine cloths like an elder but she can never have rags like an elder" (p. 6).

As Edewede continues to insist that here child will not participate in the ceremony, Ebikere reminds her that a woman has no say in the ownership of a child, and she qualifies to be called barren since her only child is a girl. The word barren causes Edewede to recall that her first male child died after he was bitten by a snake in her mother-in-law's farm, and the second was left to die out of ignorance and superstition after it was declared an evil child because it was born with the umbilical cord tied around its neck like a necklace. After all, her friend Mama-Nurse has since said that it was perfectly normal for a child to be born that way.

On hearing Mama-Nurse being referred to as an authority on health matters, Ebikere asks why she couldn't save Oseme's elder sister if her medicine was potent, and warns Edewede that she will definitely be ruined since she continues to run to her for everything. Edewede still convinced of Mama-Nurse's expertise explains that she went to her late with her late daughter for treatment because of the time wasted in applying the traditional medicine Ebikere had brought. Ebikere bolts out of the compound furiously maintaining that Oseme must take part in the ceremony the next time it holds.

This debate for and against circumcision continues when Ordia, Edewede's husband returns from his journey and finds out the reason for the quarrel between his mother and his wife. He insists on his daughter joining in the ceremony because others have always done it and because it is a part of the people's tradition. Ordia defends his position saying: "It is difficult to give up an age long tradition" (p. 15). Edewede on her part recounts how he is often away on his business trips, not knowing how she suffers during initiation ceremonies. She recalls her gruesome experience when her first daughter died. The playwright uses the flashback method to allow the fullest insight into Edewede's fears about her only surviving child. It is also during the flashback that we see how much Mama-Nurse has contributed to preparing Edewede for the battle to save her surviving daughter.

MAMA-NURSE: Listen to my strong advice to you. When death comes, sickness goes. This is the time for you to act and not cry "yeh, yeh, yeh! Away with fear and resignation! Use your anger and grief wisely to reverse the order of things ... If not, look out. That daughter of yours over there will die a victim one day very soon. And once again you will cry. (p. 22)

Edewede, in concluding her argument against circumcision, employs soothing words to make her husband see reasons. She observes that it is time they made away with out-dated traditions, because everything has its time. Her argument is well received by Ordia. He asks for time to secure accommodation in town so he can take his family away from the community. But Edewede, not seeing it as a total solution, insists on fighting the tradition rather than running away, leaving other children to suffer. She pleads with Ordia not to see it as a personal thing, but as a struggle for all female children. Ordia, undecided, merely looks at her and storms out.

Edewede in confusion recalls how she married Ordia against her parents' advice, which is the more reason she must not allow the marriage to fail. It is in this circumstance that her friend Ebungbe calls to share her feelings and encourages her. They resolve to call all the young mothers to a meeting with Mama-Nurse in attendance.

The meeting begins with Edewede introducing the subject;

EDEWEDE: My fellow women, i greet you all. We all agreed to gather here today to meditate upon issues touching all of us. I bring you nothing but words. Words to help you know yourself better so as to be able to choose for yourself between light and darkness...Everybody, please stand up and welcome our mother fondly called Mama-Nurse (p. 36).

Mama-Nurse (Eriala) receives a standing ovation with drumbeats rending the air. She starts her address with a chant “freedom to womanhood” and the women respond:

MAMA-NURSE: My speech will be brief. You all already know what circumcision is. You have all been through it. But do you know why you do it? Do you know what harm you do to yourself by agreeing to do it? (p. 38).

Mama-Nurse educates the women on the dangers of circumcision which include retention of urine and the offensive odour that goes with it, genital infections that could lead to H.I.V. reproductive track infections that could infertility, tetanus, obstructed labour which could cause haemorrhage etc. In conclusion, she leaves the women with this advice:

MAMA-NURSE: If you want to savour the greatest joy of life you must rise up and fight. Fight against female mutilation. Fight for your freedom. Fight for womanhood. A word is enough for the wise (pp. 40-41).

This inspiring address moves the women into agreeing never again to allow their children engage in such an evil practice again. Consequent upon the women’s decision, Edewede is publicly repudiated by the men folk. The women in the community join her in solidarity after swearing an oath never to return until Edewede is recalled.

In the end, the elders are unable to contend with both the problems of men having to run the homes alone and the strange things that begin to happen in the community. They consult an oracle and are warned to bring back the women immediately.

SEER: Ah! The air is bubbling. And the place is crowded. But where are those who ought to be here that are not here? Where are the pearls of the sea? (p. 59).

The recalling of the women as directed by the oracle becomes an issue for debate amongst the elders. Some are longing to see an immediate end to the crisis while others are bent on maintaining tradition. The king decides to put the matter to vote and the result is favour of appeasing the women. The women are sent and, on their return, the king resolves the issue with a final pronouncement.

KING: Yes, you are welcome ... Now I make my declaration public. As from this day, whereas the initiation ceremonies shall still be performed, female circumcision is banned in this village. Whosoever is found practicing it in any form will not step out of this village alive. Let those who have heard tell those who haven’t heard (p. 62).

In conclusion, the primitive insistence of some people, men and women on continuing the evil act of female circumcision in Nigeria cannot be logically defended by the promoters of the cruelty against women. The physical, psychological and social effect on the victims as we have stated in this study calls for a deliberate effort towards stamping out the menace. Women, old

and young should collaborate with men as we have seen in *Edewede* by Julie Okoh to educate the people about the evil blade and by so doing, the cultural practice will be stamped out.

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