

# GENDER MARGINALIZATION AND THE STRIVE FOR EMANCIPATION IN NIGERIAN DRAMA: JULIE OKOH'S EDEWEDE AND BARCLAYS AYAKOROMA'S DANCE ON HIS GRAVE AS PARADIGMS

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<http://www.ajol.info/index.php/cajtm.v.12.2.2>

## Abstract

*Over the years, the major challenges facing women especially in the African society, are cultural discrimination and unfair treatment. Women, in most communities have been experiencing exploitation and discrimination while some homes are in crises due to the establishment of patriarchal strongholds. Based on the tenets of patriarchy, women are often seen as inferior beings, whose freedoms are restricted and who must adhere to certain culturally prescribed norms. Women are marginalized in most communities politically, socially, culturally and economically. Ayakoroma and Okoh, in their commitment as playwrights, project issues of discrimination and male dominance in their plays. This paper attempts to examine certain cultural practices that subjugate and traumatize women in Nigeria as they are represented in the plays under study in a bid to highlight the harmful effects they have on women and the need for a re-assessment of these practices. The paper suggests that, breaking the practice of discrimination against women using cultural structures begins with questioning and speaking out against such structures. The paper is approached from the perspective of Content Analysis, while analyzing Julie Okoh's Edewede and Barclays Ayakoroma's Dance On His Grave, to investigate cultural and discriminatory acts against women in the plays. The theory of liberal feminism is adopted to buttress the work. Other sources of data include internet and journals. The research reveals the need to conscientize women to develop positive attitudes and this has to begin from homes and schools. It is the view of the paper that elimination of these harmful cultural*

*practices will not only empower Nigerian women but will lead to their socio-economic development and political advancement. The paper recommends that women should be given equal rights and opportunities while the cultural acts that discriminates against women should be abolished.*

## **INTRODUCTION.**

Most societies have different cultures which have existed for generations, some of which have persisted and endured the test of time. Some of the cultural practices have positive effects on society while some adversely affect only a segment of the society such as women. Studies have shown that some cultural practices prevalent among some ethnic groups in Nigeria do not promote the development and empowerment of women; instead, they further contribute to women's oppression and subjugation. Throughout history, Nigerian women generally have had fewer legal rights and opportunities than men. In traditional society, Motherhood was considered as women's most significant profession and women were considered weaker than men, and taken for granted in most cases with the result that women are often subjected to varied obnoxious cultural practices. Being a patriarchal society, African albeit Nigerian society has continued to uphold men's supremacy over women and have continued to sanction acts of intimidation, oppression and subjugation of women. Accordingly, Daniel-Inim reiterates:

One can assert with some degree of certainty that patriarchy has been operational in society for as long as organised society has existed. Societal norms and traditions have been formulated by men to the detriment of women. Since the feminist awakening of women with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* in the 19th century, many female writers have been

empowered to use their writings to sing better revolutionary tunes for motherhood. (223)

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

### Culture

This is the behaviour and thinking of people living in social groups. In the context of this study, we make reference to African culture. African culture here, includes the people's belief system, rules of behavior, language, rituals, art, technology, style of dress and so on. It refers to the totality of the way of life of a people in a society which is shaped and influenced by their history and believe system. Accordingly, Macionis defines culture as:

The social behavior and norms found in human societies... some aspects of human behavior, social practices such as culture, expressive forms such as art, music dance, ritual and religions and technologies such as tool usage, cooking, shelter and clothing are said to be cultural universals, found in human societies. ( 53)

### Discrimination

This has to do with the preferential treatment of people based solely on their membership in a socially distinct group or category, such as ethnicity, sex, individual rights and merits. English dictionary defines it as "Treating of a person or particular group of people differently, especially in a worse way from the way in which you treat other people, because of their skin, colour, sex, sexuality etc. In discussing discriminations against women, it becomes necessary to interrogate the sources, courses, impact and implications of the varied distinctions of discriminations which women are exposed to in African culture.

### **SYNOPSIS OF JULIE OKOH'S *EDEWEDE***

The play *Edewede* is an eponymous play, meaning “the dawn of a new day” which derives its title from the name of the lead character, ‘Edewede’. The play is centred on the issue of female genital mutilation and the struggle to eradicate it. In the play’s narrative, Ebikere is scheming to have her granddaughter, Osieme, a 12 years old adolescent girl, circumcised as is the customary practice. But Edewede is bent on preventing it, having lost a sister and a daughter through complications arising from circumcision. Ordia, Edewede’s husband and Ebikere’s only son is torn between his love for his immediate family represented in his wife and daughter and that of his mother, representing tradition. Edewede and her husband disagree on the matter. Eriela, a local Nurse convinces Edewede that it is time they take a stand against the procedure that is causing so much pain and death to so many. They begin talking to women at the market place and were encouraged to learn that they all have negative notions and bad experiences associated with circumcision. They try to reason with their husbands, but the men simply do not see their points. In order to make the men listen, the women decide to leave their houses and children for the men to take care of while they go to live down the road. The men begin to see how important the women are and the need to reconsider their stance in matters concerning obnoxious cultural practices. A decision to ban circumcision is therefore taken.

### **SYNOPSIS OF BARCLAYS AYAKOROMA'S *DANCE ON HIS GRAVE***

In Barclays Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave*, themed around the concept women’s struggle for power, space and authority, the playwright presents a scenario where the women of Toru-Ama insist on equality of the sexes, and thereby drive home their point through the weapon of stubbornness. The men's thought that they could nip the revolt in the bud by flogging sense into the women failed. Trouble however starts when a young lady from Tori-Ama elopes with a young man from an enemy village,

Agiama and the two communities are almost on a war path. Fearful that their sons would be sacrificed in a senseless war for the mere honour of a woman, who has gone in quest of love on her own volition; the women in Tori-Ama see the event as a turning point for them to launch a blistering attack on their men folk who make all the rash decisions that affect their lives.

The wife of the King, Queen Alaere, leads Tori-Ama women in the attack conceived to place women on equal footing with the men or at least extract a measure of respect from the men, Fed up with their lots as wives, mothers and home-makers, who although they have been satisfying the sexual urges that drive the men in their lives, have remained marginalized, relegated and not acknowledged for their arduous roles in building the community. The women of Tori-Ama decided to rebel, to go on strike in order to bring their men to their knees. Although the playwright gives the women's rebellion theme a rather tragic dimension; she however, makes a partial success of it.

They make a resolution not to cook, sweep or take care of the children. They cap off their rebellion with sex starving for their men. To hit the king hard, the Queen raises the improbable scenario of the king not being the father of their daughter on the maxim that only a mother can know with certainty, who the father of a child and this brings him to question his fatherhood. Beke their daughter takes sides with her mother amidst the feud. The king takes her utterances literally and opts for suicide to avoid the shame that his wife went outside to have a child and brought her home to mock his manhood.

## **HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES THAT DISCRIMINATE AGAINST WOMEN-IN JULIE OKOH'S *EDEWE* AND AYAKOROMA'S *DANCE ON HIS GRAVE***

### **SON Preference**

The issue of discrimination against women in the society has been a recurring problem. It manifests in several ways. Culture itself is the totality of the way of life of a people in a given

society. Different families make up a community. The family has traditionally been the basic unit of the society, where women have long been charged with upholding society's values in their roles as wives and mothers, these responsibilities remain constant. The status of women were set at birth. Sons are cherished more than girls in most families, not only for their physical and economic ability to contribute to the family but also as the carriers of the family name. Daughters are considered as inferior beings because they would eventually leave home and marry into another family. Patricia Udeh, a widow in an oral interview, states;

I lost my husband at the age of 32, I had 4 girls, my first daughter was 13 (thirteen years), no male child, after my husband's death, his brothers shared their inherited properties includes plots of land without giving anyone to me or any children. I had no space to farm on despite the fact that my husband was the first son of their parents, I feel so sad. (Oral interv)

Sons are considered future heads of the family, who will assist and provide for their parents in their old age. In such communities, sons are viewed as assets and girls as liabilities. Sons (men) are usually the ones involved in decision making both in the family and in the wider society and that would account for why king Olotu takes decision on their daughter without discussing with his wife Queen Alare in *Dance on His Grave*. This attitude is exacerbated by an entrenched bride-price system that often serves as a source of income. Women often suffer a lot for their inability to have male children. This preference for male children is exposed in the play *Edewede* where Edewede's mother-in-law Ebikere continues to regard her as a 'barren woman' because she does not have a male child. Thus Ebikere fumes:

How many men in this village treat their wives like he (her son) does? Others in his place would have since married another woman. His

homestead is empty, yet he calls you 'my wife', go away! Barren woman (*Edewede* 8).

Edewede insists that she is not barren, that she has a daughter, Oseme, but Ebikere is unconvinced as she states further:

Having only one issue is like having none at all.  
And a girl too, (Hissing) chew! Nonsense  
(*Edewede* 8).

It is pertinent to note that Edewede has had two sons who died. She actually lost one of her sons to superstition. She recalls:

I have had male issues. My first son was bitten to death by a snake in your plantation. Six years ago, I had another baby boy. He cried, mama, I heard him cry. But nobody came to his rescue. They said he was an evil child, for he wore the cord around his neck like a necklace. I would have died too, while waiting for the medicine man to come and separate me from him. But God saved me (*Edewede* 8).

Despite the facts that she had lost two sons, she is still seen as a barren woman.

### **Fault Finding**

In most societies, when a man dies, his wife is the first suspect, when a couple is childless; the woman is the first suspect. The daughters of the man's patrilineage and the mother-in-law take special interest in scrutinizing the wife, they usually use this period to assert their authorities, as could be seen in the actions of *Ebikere*, Edewede's mother in law, who accuses her daughter-in-law of being childless because

### **Bride-price Payment**

Payment of bride price is very significant in African culture, but at times, used negatively against women. Marriage is seen as an institution for procreation. Every woman desires to marry and have children in order to express her womanhood. The basis of marriage among Africans, implies the transfer of a woman's fertility

to the husband's family. To facilitate this transfer of fertility, bride-price is paid. The bride-price gives exclusive sexual rights to men. In *Dance on His Grave*, payment of bride-price is very significant in patriarchal ideology. It means that the woman has been bought over completely. For instance, in exasperation for his wife's behaviour, king Olotu says:

You are my wife; that is why I paid bride price on your head. Once you have sold your fish at the market, you can't expect to have them back and keep the money (*Dance on His Grave* 23).

By the use of this proverb, king Olotu reminds his wife that she has been completely sold, and has no right to question her 'buyer'. By this expression, king Olotu articulates a patriarchal ideology and celebrates masculinity.

### **Excluding Women's Opinions in Decision Making**

In most societies, most husbands exclude their wives in decision making so that even in areas that bother on the women's health, their husbands alone take the final decision. In households and communities, women are not allowed to say their view or partake in decision making in families. In *Dance on His Grave*, King Olotu points out that he did not pay his wife's bride price for her to reason for him, that it is his right, as the man to do all the reasoning in the house. He states:

You are not here to reason woman! I didn't pay all that bride price on your head for you to come here and reason for me! I do all the reasoning for you and every other person in this house! No more of that rubbish in my place! (*Dance on His Grave* 25).

The above statement shows how women are excluded from the decision making system, even in their own homes. It supports the notion that women are to be seen but never to be heard. Women are perpetually excluded from the male domain of community. Furthermore, as men of *Tori-ama* meet to reassess the threat of



the women, they invoke the power of the ancestors to support themselves. They see the threat as a trespass into the male threshold. Responding to this, Apodi, one of the chiefs, says. "This is unheard of; women wanting to put on thinking caps (*Dance on His Grave* 36).

Osima another chief, immediately reacts in support:

They think taking care of the affairs of  
this land is the same as haggling in  
zarama market ( 36).

In Nigeria, women are often associated with trading in the market, that is why we have the term 'market women' and never 'market men' as if men do not trade. Women are reduced to a permanent state of dependence and estrangement. They are most often seen as outsiders among their husband' families. Accordingly Lauretta Ngcobo asserts that:

A wife is always an outsider among her husband's  
people, always the first suspect when things go  
wrong. And her position or motherhood entails  
hard labour to provide food for the family (535).

### **Female Genital Mutilation**

Female genital mutilation involves partial or total removal of the external female genital for non-medical purposes. It interferes with the natural functioning of the body and has no health benefits. One of the cultural practices evident in some societies is female genital mutilation. In very moving dramatic sketches, *Edewede* re-interrogates issues concerning female genital mutilation practices in Nigeria. In *Edewede* the tradition demands that a girl child must be circumcised and the child or her mother has no right to determine what happens to her or her daughter, even if the act will lead to the girl's death. Leaning on their patriarchal strongholds, the men have always supported this harmful cultural practice.

As the play unfolds, we find Ebikere, *Edewede*'s mother-in-law insisting on having her granddaughter, Oseme, circumcised, in spite of the fact that she had earlier lost Izenebu, her older

granddaughter and Oseme's, sister to circumcision. Edewede is adamant, she refuses to allow her daughter to be circumcised and this leads to conflict between Ebikere and Edewede, and eventually culminates into a community crises. Before the conflict Ebikere informs her granddaughter Osieme that circumscion is a thing of joy, prestige and cultural identity. She tries to prepare Osieme's mind for the exercise as she works on her psychological bearing thus:

Your bravery in the camp of circumcision will be the pride of your family and lineage. You are from the family of a brave warrior. Ah! The descendant of Edokparu, the Ugbomhagesin, revered far and wide in Otoedo land for his military prowess. Oh yes! You will be brave (Edewede 3).

She further alerts the audience and her granddaughter to the fact that the procedure for circumcision as it is carried out in Otoedo land is a painful exercise. She does not speak of any benefit that the child will derive from it nor does she give a good reason for the exercise, instead, the girl Osieme is advised that she must undergo the procedure bravely to make her family proud -the only reason given for the push to get Osieme to participate in the gruesome ritual where assistants, would have to hold their legs apart forcibly for the operation to be performed. All these lead to the conflict between Ebikere and Edewede. Edewede is publicly rejected by her husband for not allowing their daughter to participate in the exercise and evicted from the village by a ritual masquerade. This act of public humiliation motivates the women into solidarity to fight for their basic rights.

Mama Nurse explains the dangers the girls are exposed to during and after circumcision thus:

In this society, many young girls have lost their lives because of circumcision. Many women are suffering from different types of diseases because of circumcision. Tetanus, Urinary infection, VVF,

HIV/AIDs are dangerous afflictions contacted through circumcision... Women, do you know the exact reason they make you go through it? Do you know what harm you do to yourselves by agreeing to do it? (Edewede 36)

The major reason given for the practice is the belief that it curbs the sexuality of girls/women rendering them incapable of promiscuity. She further asserts that:

The custodians of our customs (men) and traditions claim that your peanut is the source of confusion and impurity. So they carve it out of its pod to prevent you from having impure thoughts. But women! For once in your lives, stop and think. Think for yourselves ... Do you think with your brain or bottom? Do you see with your heart or bottom? Do you desire with your heart or bottom? (Edewede 37).

Edewede is also the vehicle through which the playwright educates women on the reality of the circumcision exercise. She asks her mother-in-law:

What about those girls who do not return to the village and are never even mourned, after bleeding to death? Regarded as sacrifice, they are left behind for the vulture to feed on. Tell her also about those girls who do not live long enough to see the days of their marriage and motherhood because of the infection contacted through the operation (*Edewede* 5).

A good number of girls die in the process, from infection. The situation is made even more horrible by the fact that the girls that die are not mourned or accorded the honour of a burial. Traditional society conceives of each one that dies in the process as a sacrifice and they are therefore left for vultures to feed on. The waste of promising young girls seems senseless when the reason is

merely family pride and tradition. Edewede remembers that circumcision has brought tears to her eyes several times. She lost her older daughter Izenebu, her sister Azelu and her childhood friends Akalo and Denowe had all died due to circumcision.

The Nurse creates awareness and good perception as the market women begin to realize that there is a great deal of sense in her logic.. they re-calculate the issue; they recall several times where women have been promiscuous after circumcision. The women remember Ainufia who “was circumcised but how many times was she caught sneaking behind her husband's back to sleep with other men (38). They reach a logical understanding that circumcision does not prohibit sexual laxity. The Nurse further asks:

Do you forbid enjoyment? If tit is cut off, the woman is unable to enjoy sex. She becomes a mere vessel for man's pleasure...women! Are you bowls,' pots or mortars to be used and thrown to the corner, until the next time around? (*Edewede 38*).

It becomes obvious that the patriarchal structure of traditional society instituted and maintained the practice for the sole benefit of the men. The myth of curbing sexuality was so that the men would have wives who are strictly faithful while they could do as they pleased and have as many wives as they wish. Under such circumstances, the women are merely toys for men's pleasure and convenience. In addition the physical pain it involves, the health consequences and instances of death that occur often are all to give the men advantage over the women.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The bible records that in the beginning, God created man and saw the need for a man to have a companion; He created a female to complement the man in his survival and development. But, women, especially in Nigeria, have continued to be oppressed

by certain cultural practices. Okoh and Ayakoroma have tried to bring out the problems faced by women in a patriarchal society such as gender differentiation, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, son preference, bride price payments and many others for purposes of awareness and critical re-orientation. The researcher wishes to assert that women are also human and require support and empowerment.

In view of the above, I strongly recommend the following:

1. That parents should treat and raise children on the basis of equity and equality to avoid inferiority complex on the part of the girl- child- conscientization should start from families;
2. A husband should see his wife as a help mate and not as a servant. A help mate is someone you confide in and share your views with. Women should be allowed to make inputs into important family issues;
3. Laws, already enacted, such as sexual offences and domestic violence should be enforced. Appropriate measures should be taken to impose penalties, punishments and other enforcement mechanisms for the prevention and eradication of violence and discrimination against women;
4. The Nigerian constitutional provision of equality for all citizens should be enforced to the latter;
5. The cultural practices of various communities should be re-examined and re-appraised.
6. The mass media should project programmes and views that condemn harmful cultural practices against women. These would help in enlightening the citizens on the need to end all forms of obnoxious cultural practices against women.
7. Harmful cultural practices against women should be discouraged in all communities as a way of protecting women.

## CONCLUSION

In Nigeria, many cultural practices subjugate and harm women. They include female genital mutilation, wife beating, son preference and so on. All violations of women's rights may be described as harmful practices, but there are particular forms of violence against women which are defended on the basis of tradition, culture, religion or superstition by some community members. All these practices are often carried out without the consent of the woman and therefore constitute a violation of human rights. The duo of Julie Okoh and Barclays Ayakoroma have been able to capture some of these harmful cultural practices in their plays in a bid to raise crucial queries about the socio-economic and health implications of these practices and expose the plight of the women who are subjected to such obnoxious practices for possible eradication or modifications of the practices.

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