
AFRREV LALIGENS

An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies

Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

Vol. 2 (1) February, 2013:67-80

ISSN: 2225-8604(Print)

ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

**The Constructive, Reformative and Revolutionary Image of
the African Woman in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *The Trial of
Dedan Kimathi* and Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun***

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Abstract

Many African playwrights present women as hapless victims in the hands of men which is believed to be the true image of women given the patriarchal nature of the African Society. These women are portrayed as underdogs, prostitutes and witches without progressive or adventurous attributes. Incidentally, the reverse is the case in the works written by men, used in this study. These men portray women as active participants in the socio-political and economic development of their societies. They present women who are determined to transform their societies positively as they participate in revolutionary struggle. This paper examines the role of women in revolutionary struggles and concludes that it is possible to exalt women from the observatory pedestal to a participatory pedestal in all spheres of human

endeavour and that they will excel. It recommends the need to revisit and deconstruct the African tradition and culture that inhibit women's social mobility.

According to the new Encyclopaedia Britannica volume 10 1993 edition, revolution "... constitutes a challenge to an established political order and the eventual establishment of a new order radically different from the proceeding one (a).

Revolution therefore involves a great change in the political and social system of the affects a society. It affects the entire people one way or the other depending on the level of the revolution. Some people participate actively as freedom fighters while others support the fighters in different ways. In this study, we encounter revolution at two levels, one at a regional level, while the other one is at a national level. The two plays are historical plays based on the Agbekoya, farmers' revolts of 1966-67 in the Western Region of Nigeria and the Kenyan struggle for independence (MAU-MAU) in the pre-colonial Kenya respectively. These plays present women who participate actively in revolutionary struggles in their respective societies.

Talking of women in revolutionary struggles, Agbasiere while discussing Sembene Ousman's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) asserts that

the revolutionary spirit of the women becomes more apparent in their action outside the homes ... getting organized and fighting a common foe which is the colonial administration (27).

In the same way, Ekpong sees Anowa as "a revolutionary, self-assertive, intelligent and resilient young woman" (28). Similarly, the revolutionary spirit in Titubi is seen in her ability to realize that marshal has fallen in love with her but

does not take advantage of him, rather her sexuality helps in awakening in her, social consciousness and she is able to define himself anew as a free subject capable of taking decisions independent of any form of coercion (Ajayi 98).

Although Femi Osofisan in an interview with Muyiwa Awodiya denies that he singles out women deliberately as heroines in some of his plays, he admits that, "women are part of the whole struggle. He observes that in revolution, the female characters

adopt a positivistic view ... and not just fold their arms in tears and self pity. Rather they plan, execute and concretize. Through this maze of self – assertion, the female individualism and personality shows, she appears in another light as a person capable of taking and effecting decision. (4).

This means that women are not passive observers to action in the society as seen in the active roles they play revolutionary struggles as portrayed in the two plays under consideration especially the woman in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*.

In a study of this nature, it is difficult not to mention feminism because the idea of presenting and projecting female characters as independent, strong-willed and fearless is feminist oriented. The playwrights whose plays are used in this study could be regarded as feminist writers going by the picture of a feminist writer painted by Ama Ata Aidoo:

... no writer, female or male is a feminist just by writing about women. Unless a particular writer commits his or her energies, actively protesting the ongoing degradation of women, celebrating their physical and intellectual capabilities and above all, unfolding a revolutionary vision of their role (16).

In a situation where many African playwrights, especially men, depict women as passive and docile observers of action, as "... underdogs, weak characters without positive, progressive or revolutionary attribute" (Awodiya 148) we encounter male playwrights present women as active participants in a revolutionary struggle, a kind of war which is regarded as an exclusive reserve of men. This necessitates this study considering the saying in Igboland that men fight the war and women tell the story of they fought. What then the role of women in revolutionary struggles as presented in the two plays? Although, Ngugi and Osofisan do not concentrate on the protestation of the degradation of women, they have in these plays celebrated the prowess of the African women. This is in contrast with the presentation of women by other playwrights who treat female characters superficially without any attempt at a psychological analysis of the characters or concerned.

From the ritualistic origins of drama in Africa, the dramatists have been propelled by a sense of commitment. This commitment enables them to portray their traditional belief system, to satirize some social ills or to deal with other socio-political issues of the society. The contemporary playwrights seem to be more committed as they respond more and more to the historical, political and social development of their societies. Consequently, there has been a considerable shift from the earlier supernatural concerns to more contemporary secular and social issues. Drama as the most effective literary tool in the portrayal of life in a society because of its ability to present life realistically to the audience becomes a veritable instrument for the education, information, sensitization and mobilization of the people.

Achebe believes that it is "...impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message," (58) for the education of the audience. How far is the artist, especially the African playwright, educating his/her audience and how truthful is the portrayal of the African woman in drama? It is rare to find female characters in African plays who are rational, hardworking, individualistic, assertive, militant, fighting for and claiming what belong to them as seen in the plays selected for this study. This justifies this study. Female characters in most plays are docile so not prepared to fight injustice. The few emancipated ones are portrayed to assert themselves negatively through prostitution, and witchcraft, while some of the educated women are presented as radical and irrational feminists.

A woman is therefore taught right from childhood to be docile and submissive for perpetual enslavement by her father and husband. These legends do not justify the presentation of negative or passive images of women in literary works especially in drama, which is close to life as it is lived. African past is full of positive female influences and noble achievements by the likes of Queen Amina of Zaria, Queen Nzingha of Angola, Moremi of Ile-Ife, Yao Asantewa of Ghana and others who feature prominently in African history and legends but rarely reflected in plays.

The image of women seen in most plays is the portrayal of a female character whose sole ambition and inspiration in life revolves around marriage and procreation. She aspires to perform these natural roles efficiently, and

These roles saddle her with the responsibilities of producing, nurturing children and taking care of the home.

Right from childhood she is constantly reminded of these duties so that by the time she reaches adulthood, she comes to accept them as her *raison d'être* (Ezeigbo 1996: xv).

Any contrary aspiration and conduct by a woman is condemned, the man is encouraged to fulfil and actualize himself while the woman is content to remain in the hearth, as wife and mother.

These are realities of the African world-view but a playwright decides on a particular perspective and interpretation through which he/she creates an alternative reality or an illusion of reality regarded as authentic. The playwright mirrors the society but unfortunately, the image of the African woman reflected in this mirror is not wholly authentic since it does not reflect the hardworking and self-assured woman but women as objects to be sold and bought. The buyer therefore must examine it properly before paying for it. For instance, in J.P. Clark's *The Masquerade* (1964) she is described as "... a cow or a calabash, all placid, beautiful and smooth outside ... can hardly rule out roughness within ..." (5). She must be sold to the highest bidder and for economic reasons as in Efua Sutherland's *the Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) where Ananse plans to give his daughter, Anansewa, in marriage to four different chiefs to amass wealth by collecting money and gifts from them. Meanwhile, Anansewa is not aware of the plan and has never seen any of the chiefs before. When she realizes her father's plans, she cries out in exasperation. "... Oh! my father is selling me ... like some parcel to a customer" (10-11). She resists but her father uses intimidation and blackmail to force her into submission. In the same way, Ogwuma in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972) is forced to marry the rich Adigwu instead of Uloko whom she loves, because her father needs the money from her bride price desperately "... for a very expensive sacrifice for (her) brother whom sickness almost killed". She is not expected to object or question the decision because "... a man's daughter is a source of wealth to him" (9).

A woman, as a commodity is bought by a man deserves the right to treat her as his property. This explains why in Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (1972), a man beats his wife for not being at home at the appropriate time. He insists that he must always find his "food and woman waiting at the table" (32) despite the woman's plea that she "must leave the house to fetch the food". He maintains that a mere woman whom he paid to get with his own hard earned money cannot challenge him in his own house. (24).

Women are also presented as prostitutes like Ngozi in Emeka Nwabueze's *A Dance of the Dead*, (1991) or Hester in Athol Fugard's *Hello and Goodbye* (1974), as a witch like Oraeme in J.P. Clark's *Ozidi* (1966) or *Ogboinba* in Obotude Ijemere's *Woyengi* (1966), or as a tyrant and senseless termagant like Amope in Soyinka's *Trail of Brother Jero*; Segi in Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) is labeled the witch of night clubs and Samia in Tewfik Al Hakin's *Fate of A cockroach* is a senseless feminist. These are some of the presentations of lopsided pictures of the women in African drama.

Fortunately many writers especially women are trying to change this picture, but this reconstruction of the female character is more in the novel where a lot of female writers have emerged. In drama, a few have emerged with Tess Onwueme blazing the trail. In her play, *The Reign of Wazobia* (1992) Wazobia decrees

Henceforth, women shall have equal rights of inheritance in matters of rights of inheritance in matters of land and property. We put a final seal on wife beating ... for none is a slave to another. Men and women (are) partners in progress not antagonists (34).

Other female playwrights like Micere Mugo, Irene Salami, Penina Muhando, Fatima Dike and others have joined in this task of reconstructing the image of the African woman in drama.

It is encouraging to see that it is possible to depict independent and courageous women who are neither prostitutes nor witches in African drama. These playwrights are creating new consciousness in African drama where the female characters receive greater and positive attention instead of a situation where they remain passive observers of the action. In the two plays selected for this research, men and women are seen truly as partners in progress as both work relentlessly for the success of their revolutionary struggles. This is seen clearly in Femi Osofisan's *Morountodun* (1982) and Ngugi Wa Thiongo/Micere Mugo's *The Trail of Dedan Kimathi* (1976).

The women we encounter in these plays are not dependable to men as either fathers or husbands. They are not presented as "one-dimensional cardboard characters who exist to serve as defining backdrops for male characters" (Ajayi 97). On the contrary, they include brave, daring, fearless, rich, arrogant, intelligent, perceptive, dogmatic, callous, bitter, compassionate and humorous women who are involved in revolutionary struggles at different

levels. This shows that the women we encounter in the plays are not all goodness. The playwrights succeed in presenting realistic pictures of the women who as human beings are capable of being virtuous or vicious. Their awareness and consciousness of their precarious situation make them loyal and committed to the cause they are fighting for which is social justice. Among them are the Woman (*The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*) Mosun, Wura and other peasant women (*Morountodun*). There are other women who get involved in the struggles by chance but once indoctrinated, they are as loyal and committed as the women who were there at the onset. They include Titubi in *Morountodun* and the Girl in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. Also, there are other women, the conservatives who lack consciousness and are opposed to social change like Alhaja Kabirat in *Morountodun*.

The play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, revolves around Dedan Kimathi, the leader of the revolutionary struggle who despite, attempts, through intimidation and bribery refuses to betray his people. It has a lean plot line which consists of the preparation to try Kimathi, the actual trial and attempt to rescue him. In this outline is an unrelieved, tension between the indomitable revolutionaries and the omnipresent colonial army and police who see every woman or a child as “Mau-Mau terrorist”. This fact only “testifies to the mass character of the nationalist struggle” (Amuta 158). The playwright is more radical in presenting the woman. He gives a vivid and detailed description of her before she speaks her first line in the play.

She is between thirty and forty years of age, with a mature but youthful face, strongly built. Good looking. She wears a peasant woman’s clothes and is barefoot. Though apparently a simple peasant, the woman is Obviously world wise and perceptive of behaviour and Society throughout her actions are under control: her Body and mind are full alert, fearless determination and a spirit of daring is her character. She is versatile and full of energy in her responses to different roles and situations. A mother, a fighter, all in one (8).

She lives up to this description as she undertakes her tasks in the struggle. The courage and strength she exudes is tremendous as she initiates, coordinates and helps to execute plans and efforts to rescue Kimathi from the prison. By giving a woman this task, and she undertakes it effectively, Ngugi and Mugo, have carried women emancipation to greater heights. They show

also that women are important partners and active participants in progress in any area of human endeavour.

Woman in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is the most forceful and the most militant of all the female characters to be discussed in this study. She is one of the backbones of the Mau-Mau freedom fighters in the play. She is brave, resolute, courageous and dedicated. She is a teacher, a fighter, a mother, a spy and she is not sentimental. All these attributes makes her usefulness to the cause unequaled and almost indispensable. Kimathi finds her admirably heroic as he calls on her

*Come forward mother of people
Teach us a lesson on diligence and
Commitment (73).*

As the play begins, Kimathi has been arrested and the freedom fighters are making attempts to rescue him. Already, there has been an attempt earlier at rescue and the colonialists are vigilant, as they anticipate another one. Since the colonial soldiers are not supposed to be “frightened by a woman’s skirt ... A woman’s ‘gardening’ and ‘market basket’ (10), the woman turns these items into tools for concealing weapons. She hides a gun in a loaf of bread that is contained in her ‘gardening’ and ‘market basket’.

She uses her female antics and qualities to escape from the soldiers and carries on with her revolutionary works. She hides a pistol in a loaf of bread and dramatizes helplessness as Johnnie, the soldier attempts to break the bread and eat. She kneels down quickly “almost reaching out for his legs” in a very smart, intelligent and passionate plea (10). This frightens the soldier and he drops the bread quickly and aims the gun at her.

Woman: (simultaneously with the above action) Don’t eat it. Bwana. Master. Afande a hundred times. It is all I have to quieten the enemy who is finishing us.

Johnnie: Enemy?

Woman: Hunger. If you take it, I’ll die. I spent so many hours kneading the heavy millet paste Have mercy on a poor woman.

Johnnie: (Obviously relieved and pleased with her supplication and feminine submissiveness. He does not know that she is over-reacting) You don't look poor to me (II)

Thus the woman escapes from being arrested with a gun. One of the effects of revolutionary struggles is that it incapacitates the men who are the acclaimed warriors from effectively discharging their duties. They cannot come out in the open. The responsibility of co-ordination therefore devolves on the women. Woman here carries out this assignment effectively as she recruits people for the struggle and plans a rescue operation for Kimathi.

Since Kimathi's arrest, the colonial administrators are at alert changing guards because they fear that there could be an armed rescue (53) for Kimathi. She has contact with one of the guards but could not find him because he had been replaced by another guard. She recruits the Fruit Seller but he "was among those picked" in the morning raid the previous day. She has no option but to disguise herself as a Fruit Seller to enable her intercept the Boy. Earlier on, she had recruited the Boy and had given him the loaf of bread that contains a gun to give to the fruit seller. In recruiting him, she indoctrinates him on the social conditions of their people and the need for a change. Confidently, she challenges him:

The day you understand why your father died, the day you, ask yourself whether it was right for him to die so; the day you ask yourself 'what can I do so that another shall not be made to die under such grisly circumstances?' that day, my son, you'll become a man (19).

These words continue to haunt the Boy until he decides to carry out the assignment. Moreover, the Boy is readily recruited because his father died as a victim of capitalist exploitation and he has known the reality of poverty and exploitation. He recalls, "I have fought with dogs and cats in the rubbish bins for food" (19) so he sees this as "the challenge to rise above the limitations imposed by his deprivation and champion the cause for which Kimathi is being tried" (Amuta 126).

The role of the Woman in the revolutionary struggle is almost indispensable. Her main pre-occupation in the play is to arrange for Kimathi to be rescued from the prison. As she undertakes this task, she outwits the white soldier, and tactfully escapes from him. She narrowly escapes from the black KAR

soldiers. She is a voice of reason in the play that creates awareness. She addresses the peasants as she listens to the Boy's story.

It is the same old story ... our people tearing one another ...all because of the crumbs thrown at them by the exploiting foreigners. Our own food eaten and leftovers thrown to us in our own land ... we buy wood from our forest; sweat on our soil for the profit of the oppressors ... (18).

She calls Boy and Girl together and educates them on the ideals of the revolution. So in her last plan for the rescue operation, she uses Boy and Girl since all the men have been arrested. She plans for Boy and Girl to enter the courtroom disguised as the Massai people with the gun still concealed in a loaf of bread. She will go in first, "dressed to kill" and will speak to Kimathi with her eyes. When she coughs they will start shooting. (61).

This plan almost worked for them but unfortunately, the home guards recognized her and she is arrested before the commencement of the operation. She is loyal to the struggle and sees no reason why traitors' lives should be spared, kinsmen or not. As a result when Wambararia's fate is being discussed because he is Kimathi's younger brother, she asks

What is this superstition about Kindred blood even
Even when it turns sour and treacherous to our long
Cherished cause? (74)

She insists that whatever decision they will take must be for the advancement of their cause and not "on the basis of kindred blood" (74). At a point she sees that Kimathi is hurt deeply. He is depressed because of his brothers' position as a traitor and the fact that his father died in the world war, his elder brother died in the 'struggle' while his mother is now mad (75-77). She tries to encourage and inspire him.

It pains the woman in me too!
Thinking of the past,
And the dear ones we left behind
Can weaken our resolve. You are
Leader of revolution. You must
Decide. But remember, all the

Others have left their wives,
Their children, their mothers,
Behind (77).

Her role here is criticized by many who see her action as callous. As a mother, she is expected to be emotional and sympathetic at least, to Kimathi's mother who as a woman is likely to lose two sons. Her critics should realize that if she allowed her actions to be influenced by her feminine emotions, she would not have succeeded as a freedom fighter. Her action is justified by subsequent action of the traitors who escaped and betrayed Kimathi to facilitate his arrest. She realizes that the risks are great but there is no sentiment in the struggle because "...the task once started must be completed" (60).

She provides a dynamic leadership and is rewarded with an unalloyed support of the masses. She is respected and her presence is inspiring. For instance as soon as she enters into the courtroom where Kimathi is facing trial, 'there is a sudden re-assurance' among the blacks (80) but she is arrested later. As she is being led out, "she hesitates directly opposite the dock to look at Kimathi – who looks at her". Kimathi understands the plan immediately because as Boy and Girl enter the courtroom, he "watches them until they take their seats"(81). She is arrested and taken away in chains but her courage, fearlessness and defiance are exhibited as she is being pushed out of the court. She is aware of her fate which is death but she is undaunted and "breaks into triumphant singing (freedom song) flooding the courtroom with her powerful militant voice" (81). Her exit marks the end of attempts to save Kimathi and he is sentenced to death by hanging.

Her resolute stand and belief that there are no brothers in the struggle is re-echoed in *Morountodun* where Mosun decides that her father who is a traitor should be killed. According to her, justice will be done (44). She recalls how she and others have been exploited, oppressed and humiliated. The worst aspect of it is that they were stripped naked. While the police was torturing and humiliating them, her father, the big Alhaji was winning and dinnning with the governor (46). Having convinced others of her stand, the judgment is passed and her father is condemned to death. Baba intervenes at this point and revokes the sentence because he does not want the people "to lose all respect for human" (53).

Mosun and Wura are involved in the decision-making in their own revolutionary struggles. They are among the peasant farmers who are fighting against the exploitative and oppressive rule of the state. There is ample evidence that Wura is involved in the physical battle because at the meeting called by Baba for a review of their strategies. Wura recalls:

Marshal's plan was good. With those trees we felled across the road, they could not bring their lorries and big guns close enough, they had to come on foot. And we were waiting for them (42).

Also, at that meeting, when they decided to evacuate the women and children "to stay with relatives and friends or in-laws in the city" (46). Wura is appointed to lead them.

In addition to planning and executing the operation and other major decisions, Wura and Mosun join Mama Kayode and the other women in their traditional and domestic chores. They help to wash and mend clothes, cook, and see to the general well-being of all the peasants in the camp. Mama Kayode and the other women are not involved in the actual fight in the warfront but they are consciously aware of how they are being exploited by the system through excessive taxation and institutionalized bribery and corruption as they relate their experiences to Titubi (61-6). They support their husbands fully and undertake these traditional roles with equanimity. In doing this, Omofolabo Ajayi (Awodiya) observes that:

They are not less effective in furthering the cause of revolution. While the men (and some women) engage in the physical battles with the state, the women provide the essential back-up force and support without which the men cannot sustain their armed combat (97).

He reaffirms the indispensability of women in revolutionary struggles. They participate and contribute to the success of the struggle either in the warfront or at home. Sometimes they have time for relaxation and they provide entertainment through dance, songs and riddles. These help to relieve the tension of the war and a very important contribution by the women because the soldiers need to relax and entertain themselves sometimes.

In the play, we encounter another group of women who are young and they get involved in the revolution by accident. Their youthful exuberance makes

them more daring and courageous. They are young ladies who grow from innocence or ignorance to maturity and social consciousness in course of the action. They are not involved in the revolutionary struggle from the onset but once they get involved, their commitment and dedication are exemplary. They are Girl in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Titubi in *Morountodun*. Girl is a victim of the imperialist system and experienced abuse early in life so forced to run away from home. She roams the streets with boys as they fight for left-over in the dustbins and also engages in doing odd jobs. She decides not to run away from anybody again so is about to fight it out with Boy when Woman encounters them. Her decision to remain resolute in the face of any adversary facilitates her involvement in the revolution. From the moment of her involvement she does not falter till the end when she enters the courtroom disguised as Massai but ready for action. She follows Woman's instructions faithfully for as a death sentence is passed on Kimathi and the Judge leaves, she "...breaks the bread and brings out the gun..." generating a commotion the ends the play.

Titubi belongs to the wealthy class and is arrogant. She gets involved in the revolution to save her class from destruction by the peasants. She volunteers to fight the peasants by pretending to be one of them. She is to infiltrate the peasant's camp and aid Marshal's arrest. Ironically, she undergoes a re-orientation and comes to terms with the reality of social injustice watching the massacre of innocent women and children by the police. She experiences starvation, deprivation and suffering for the first time in her life and resolves to fight with the peasants against the ruling class.

In conclusion, Femi Osofisan and Ngugi Wa Thiongo/Micere Mugo have in the two plays, present an alternative image of women in drama as opposed to the portrayal of women as witches, prostitutes or radical feminists who are termagants and fighters. In the plays studied here, we encounter women who are empowered, assertive, courageous and resolute in the desire to fight for social justice in their respective societies. It is obvious that it is difficult for a revolutionary struggle to succeed without the involvement of women. The playwrights emphasize solidarity, make use of accessible language with riddles, proverbs, songs/music employed extensively in the plays to give them local and traditional background.

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