

# **Nuptials of the Gods: Zulu Sofola and Zodwa Motsa Compared**

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## **Introduction**

Apart from the first letter of the names of these two playwrights, (letter Z), the playwrights, Zulu Sofola and Zodwa Motsa possess certain things in common. Both of them fashion the universe of their plays out of the fabric of the culture and tradition of their people. Both manifest an ambience of ambivalence - loving the beautiful aspects of the culture and hating the 'carnivorous' facets of these cultures. The word carnivorous implies a destructive tendency, and such tendencies are manifested in diverse ways. These ways include patriarchal oppression, deprivation of human rights, 'deification' of wealth and position, just to mention a few. Both playwrights are academics, although belonging to different generations. Sofola was the first published Nigerian female dramatist and the first African female Professor of Theatre Arts, while Motsa is a younger lecturer, teaching at the University of South Africa. Both are Africans, although coming from different parts of the continent. Zulu Sofola was a Nigerian, belonging to the Ibo tribe of Delta State in Nigeria, while Motsa is from Swaziland. Until her death in 1995, Sofola was a Professor in the Department of Performing Arts at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria.

In a way, their plays can be categorized as protest plays because they protest against the injustice perceptible in their societies. Sofola demonstrates the workings of the Ibo tradition of Southern Nigeria while Motsa reflects the old pre-colonial and early post-colonial Swazi setting. Both societies are intrinsically patriarchal and most of the

problems of the plays are resultant from the lopsidedness and selfishness manifest in the relationship between the sexes. In these societies, love is not a prerequisite for marriage. The woman is principally an object to satisfy male lust, secondarily, she is a baby-making machine. Also, she is a source of unpaid labour to her husband. In all these, she is mercilessly exploited. She is bought for a price (her bride price), and her needs are not important to her oppressors at all. She has to give value for the money expended on her. Complications also arise in the plays as a result of selfishness on the part of those who bear the staff of authority, either at the familial level or at the governmental level. In this article, we take a look at Sofola's popular play, *The wedlock of the gods* and Motsa's *Of heroes and men*.

*Wedlock of the gods* is the story of two young lovers who defy tradition in order to achieve their goal of oneness. This however leads to their death, with a promise to accomplish their nuptials in the great beyond, in the divine presence of the gods. Ogwoma, a nubile girl, has already betrothed her heart to her chosen love, Uloko. Both of them are from very poor homes. Unfortunately, Ogwoma's brother takes ill and the process of getting him healed consumes the meager resources of the home. The family then decides to auction Ogwoma to the highest bidder. Adigwu proffers the highest bid for her bride wealth, and so, the family, ignoring Ogwoma's pleas and desires to the contrary, packs her off to his house. Hardly does she have time to get over her bitterness when Adigwu dies. She however discovers that reprieve is yet to come because she is told that after the mandatory three months of mourning, she would have to take the hand of Adigwu's junior brother in marriage. Ogwoma on the other hand determines that she would follow her heart. Consequently, when Uloko resurfaces in her universe, she accepts his overtures, contrary to the dictates of tradition. This leads to tragedy because Odibei, Adigwu's mother, eventually kills Ogwoma. Uloko avenges her death by killing Odibei and he later commits suicide in order to be reunited with his lover in the great beyond.

*Of heroes and men* also traces the path of two lovers, Nontombi Mamba and Dum'ehlezi (Duma) Ngcobo. The two young people fall in love and desire to get married. Conversely, obstacles arise in form of *Umcwasho*, a Swazi traditional observance whereby young girls would go into a period of chastity to honor a royal princess who is about to come of age. During this period, interaction with the opposite sex is forbidden. Contravening such laws would incur a fine and chastisement upon the offenders. Because of the *Umcwasho*, Nontombi and Dum'ehlezi have to carry on their courtship in secret. But more dangerous than the *Umcwasho* is the King's edict that all the girls of Nontombi's regiment, the *SiyiNqaba*, must marry men from the *Ndlavela* Brigade. The brigade has just fought and won the war against the uMshadza and the king is so happy that he gives them leave to marry any of the girls of the *SiyiNqaba* regiment, not minding that the girls of the regiment are "hardly twice ten summers old" and that they still have about ten moons to go, to complete their period of chastity. Nontombi and Dum'ehlezi unite to dare the King, drawing courage from the strength of their love, which eventually leads to their immolation.

One basic point of similarity between both plays compared in this article has inspired the phrase 'nuptials of the gods'. This emphasizes the death motif in the plays. The young lovers are not able to consummate their love through marriage here on earth due to the antagonism presented by their societies in the guise of constituted authority and carnivorous tradition. The lovers choose to concretize their ideals and enter the realm of the gods through death to actualize their union. The death motif reveals a subtle protest by the playwrights and brings out these questions: why must it be the gods alone who should witness the actualization of radicals' dreams? Why can't modern society allow the wind of change to blow and bring positive yields to the society? In these plays, the radical lovers are killed, also, in the larger society, radicals are banished or compelled to go on self-exile from their countries and some are summarily executed or brutally murdered. Human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, Civil Liberties Organization and many others keep on fighting such tyranny on the international scene. The playwrights too refuse to remain silent in the face of oppression.

### **The Patriarchal Domain**

*Wedlock* and *Heroes* present for us a patriarchal domain in which the word of the male is law and the female disobeys at great peril to her life. We witness patriarchy in action within the immediate family structure, the larger society and at the state level. Within the immediate family structure, we observe Ogwoma's father in *Wedlock*, vetoing Ogwoma's desire to marry her heartthrob, Uloko and forcing her into a loveless and destructive marriage with Adigwu. Ogwoma cannot marry according to the dictates of her heart because, belonging to the voiceless gender in society, she has to bow to the command of the patriarchal oppressor, personified in this instance by her father. Her brother, the heir of the family, is ill, and money is needed to take care of him. Ogwoma, a female, and the less important child, like the fattened calf, then becomes the sacrificial lamb to be sold for the bride price. In Ibo custom, a premium is put on the bride price. Women are given out (or sold) at exorbitant price.

The problem of exorbitant bride price is a long-standing one. As far back as 1963, this issue was written into the Laws of Eastern Nigeria, with the title, Limitation of Dowry Law, Cap. 76. The issue also attracted the attention of the civilian government between 1979 and 1983. The idea was to peg the amount payable as bride price to something between sixty and three hundred Naira (not more than two Dollars). In reality though, no one takes cognizance of the official price. Since it is not possible to take one's prospective parents-in-law to the law courts, the unofficial price remains. This unofficial price starts from fifteen thousand Naira (one hundred and twenty Dollars), and does not have any ceiling. Determining factors include the level of education of the bride-to-be, the job of the groom-to-be, the status of the groom's/bride's families and other extenuating circumstances.

Apart from the immediate repercussion that we see in the play as revealed in the multiple death tragedy, a close look into the larger society reveals various ills that accompany the exorbitant bride price issue. The first problem is the breeding of a set of girls that can be classified as gold diggers. They do not fall in love disinterestedly; rather, they consciously seek to have liaisons with rich men who would be able to pay their bride price. Prostitution is another fallout of this high bride price regime. Many ladies who would have preferred to be in their own homes, raising children cannot do so because the young men do not have the financial wherewithal to marry them. Some young ladies consequently end up as prostitutes. Secondly, the society witnesses a lot of late marriages. Young men in their prime spend a great part of their youth that could have been utilized in building homes, endeavoring to build up the bride wealth. Those who cannot wait and who do not possess any moral scruples would rather become live-in lovers, bidding their time till they are able to afford the bride price. The bride price issue is such an important one that keeps on recurring in many plays in different ways. For instance, it appeared in one of the earliest published Nigerian plays; Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*.

However, the *lobola* (bride price) issue is not the problem in *Heroes*, but the crisis is also hinged on the tribulations encountered by a young girl in quest of marriage. In a vintage patriarchal move, the King pronounces that all the girls of the *Inqaba* regiment must marry all the men from the *Ndlavela* brigade, three to a man if possible. It must be noted however that the *Ndlavela* brigade is made up of men who are fathers and age-mates of the fathers of the girls of the *Inqaba* regiment. This move by the King brings to the fore, certain problems peculiar to the African setting. These are child marriage and choicelessness of the female. This royal decree portrays women as mere objects, chattels to be used and controlled by men. They are regarded as possessions of men, and it is not permissible for them to possess a will of their own.

The act of giving girls who are barely more than children out in marriage is a counter productive one. Such child-wives hardly possess the physiological attributes required for the marriage institution. It gives rise to a situation where children give birth to children. They are also exploited in the marriage relationship because their so-called husbands are far older than them; they are indeed age mates of their fathers. In many instances, the health of such girls is permanently damaged due to the stress exerted upon their immature bodies during the childbearing process. A common disease amongst such girls is the vesico vaginal fistula. The problem of choicelessness is also illustrated in the play. The girls are not given the opportunity to choose the men they want to marry. The men make the choice and the girls have to abide. In such situations, the girls pass through life permanently disillusioned and unfulfilled. Some of them later get involved in extra marital affairs in search of self-realization and fulfilment.

### Deprivation of Human Rights

In both plays, we see that both women and men are denied their basic human rights. The basic right of falling in love becomes a luxury that they cannot afford. For instance, Nontombi cries out plaintively, "Let me discover the hills and valleys of marriage for myself". However, this is an indulgence that carnivorous tradition would not countenance. After Nontombi pledges her love to Dum'ehlezi, the young man laments:

It grieves my heart to think that we cannot be seen together in public. We cannot behave openly like two people in love. We can no more do as we please than if we were criminals! Until the day we die, we must go our separate ways. If we are rash enough to tell the world we're in love, we will be united much sooner, eMhlatjweni, Kagoqanyawo! (i.e., place of execution). (Motsa: 17, 35)

This shows the cruelty of the King's decree and the deprivation suffered by the young people.

The same thing occurs in *Wedlock*, where mercantilist considerations deprive both Ogwoma and Uloko of their rights. They are forcibly separated and this eventually leads to their deaths. We also see an unwitting agent of oppression in the play; this is Adigwu's mother, Odibei. Odibei is determined that tradition must take its course. A widow must remain in ashes for the required period of mourning and she appoints herself as the overseer who would ensure that Ogwoma carries this out. To Ogwoma, widowhood entails freedom from a loveless marriage. To Odibei, all the money paid for Ogwoma's bride wealth must not go down the drain, so she must marry Adigwu's junior brother. In performing the policing function, she becomes a thorn in Ogwoma's flesh. Deviation from traditional norms is perceived as adultery, so Odibei eventually murders Ogwoma by poisoning her.

### The Heroines – Coming of Age

*Wedlock* and *Heroes* portray the process of the heroines coming of age, throwing off by force the toga of docility and becoming consumed by the attendant tradition-inspired patriarchal fury. These heroines, Ogwoma and Nontombi, grew up obeying constituted authority, groaning under the yoke of oppression. However, the oppression became stifling and they rebelled. The *Umcwasha* in Motsa's play becomes symbolic at this level. Instead of presenting the princess who is coming of age, we see Nontombi as the one who actually comes of age. She tells her mother that she has made her choice in Dum'ehlezi, and under no circumstance would she marry the King. She declares,

About Duma, my mind is made up. I have done all the thinking that had to be done. All my life I have lived to please others - one moment my father the chief, the next,

those above him. 'Don't do this Ntombi. It reflects badly on a chief's daughter. What will people say...?' No one has ever stopped to remember that I, the girl always at your service, have a life to live too. I'm sorry mother, but I really must start living – living on my own, not in the shadow of my father the chief. The King ... no, I can't! (Motsa: 23)

She defiantly chooses death as opposed to a life of never being able to be herself. The process of the heroines' transformation starts when their personal freedom is threatened. This personal freedom is contrasted with collective freedom, and powerlessness is contrasted with empowerment. Ogwoma's rebellion is first made manifest through her resistance to the idea of marriage to Adigwu. She had to be forced, 'tied and whipped', to Adigwu's house. This form of dehumanization would either break the spirit or help in fuelling the determination to rebel. The latter becomes the case when Adigwu dies and Ogwoma refuses to marry his junior brother, but determines to now marry for love.

Ogwoma stays in Adigwu's house till his untimely death in deference to tradition and acknowledgement of the collective responsibility of solving family problems. She had to be married to save her family, but the issue of the family's needs no longer occupies a position of preeminence after Adigwu's death. Her brother is no longer in the picture and she feels all she has to do is to please herself. It is a decision for personal salvation. In the same vein, Nontombi never planned to run away when the King made the unpopular edict. At the initial level, it was a collective problem. All the girls of her regiment were involved. However, after coming to the conclusion that she would give Dum'ehlezi her heart, she begins to fight a battle for her love and her life.

Ogwoma refuses the entreaties of her mother, Nneka to stop seeing Uloko during her mourning period. She feels that she has paid her familial and societal dues by succumbing to the loveless charade with Adigwu. In order to avoid being married off to her brother-in-law after the mourning period, Ogwoma renews her love tryst, which had been truncated by the interregnum of her marriage to Adigwu. Although becoming pregnant while in mourning is certainly not a responsible act, one is able to view Ogwoma as an object deserving pity. It is no wonder that she decides to rebel and prevent a recurrence of another forced marriage by becoming pregnant for her lover while in mourning. Ogwoma's death is symbolic of the fact that the playwright does not condone her adultery. The pitiable circumstance within which she finds herself is what the playwright decries. Sofola paints this picture as a shock therapy, to jolt society to its senses and initiate change by causing it to see the consequences of its actions (James: 150).

### **The Heroes – Tradition Versus Modernity**

The two heroes in *Wedlock* and *Of Heroes* are Uloko and Dum'ehlezi. Both are young men who have specific visions of what they want from life and their desires are

tampered with by both tradition and the state. We see both of them going through a process of rational intrapersonal discourse, and arriving at the conclusion that a life where a man cannot hold up his head in liberty is not worth living. We have a situation where both characters' existence as callow youths terminates and they become transformed into men who can take responsibility for their actions. The playwrights seem to be encouraging a soul searching to examine one's portion in life and what quality of life one is living. It is a call to stop being a passive observer, and to become a committed participant in the process of living.

Uloko lost Ogwoma at the outset because he could not afford to pay her bride price. He however, decides to take another chance of happiness by seeking Ogwoma out, even in her mourning ashes. He weighs the importance of both conformity to tradition and personal happiness and decides to choose the latter. Although, one would blame him for ignoring decorum by going in to a woman in mourning, one also sympathises with him for the way he was deprived of his rights at the initial stage. He resists every attempt by his mother, Ogoli to dissuade him from falling into what she describes as Ogwoma's trap, luring her son into committing an act of abomination. Defiantly, he matchets Odibei to death, and poisons himself, not being able to bear a life without his lover, Ogwoma. He declares,

... We shall leave this cursed place; we shall ride to where there is peace ... The stars shall crown our heads, over and around we shall together roam; beautifying as we impress. (55 - 56)

Uloko sees nothing wrong in his affair with Ogwoma. Basically, he cannot be described as an amoral man. Throughout Ogwoma's marriage to Adigwu, Uloko stayed away from her because he was not interested in adultery, but now that Adigwu is dead, Uloko regards it as a proper action to claim Ogwoma's love again. He declares through his actions that it is not a crime to be poor. It is society and its inequalities that made him poor, thus depriving him of his rightful wife. He stands up to fight against tradition and all other stifling structures, which attempt to block the way of his passage into manhood. Unfortunately, this costs him his life.

Dum'ehlezi was an immature boy when we met him for the first time in the play. All he wanted was the acceptance of his love overtures by Nontombi, but by the end of the play, we see his transformation into a man, ready to protect his beloved from harm while at the same time endangering her life to achieve his aim. We see his resolve as he reacts to Nontombi's plea that they elope to the land occupied by the white people. This is the very moment of his coming of age. He has to come to terms with certain factors in his life. What should be his choice - patriotism or love? We witness his pathetic attempt at faithfulness to his king, despite the fact that the king is described as 'the worst of all the lions' (Motsa: 6), showing that the King is particularly wicked. He declares,

We will stay here and be slaves to a true king, rather than to those white men on the other side. Who knows? They may be offenders sent away by their king to die here. No, my love, we are staying. It is unmanly to run away from the scene of battle – cowardly and foolish! I swear my father would rise from his grave and curse me if I ran away. A man must fight till he can lift his arm no more, ubaba used to say. (Motsa: 27)

This shows that Dum'ehlezi has a good understanding of right and wrong. He is an upright young man who wants to live and be true to his people and tradition. Unfortunately, that same tradition, which he so much respects pronounces a death sentence upon him.

### Conclusion

The death motif in both plays implies that society is not yet ready for the change being advocated by the new generation. It also implies that as a grain falls into the ground and dies, it comes back to life, bearing more seeds. In the same way, it is hoped that the death of the youths would bring to life many others like them, building up a formidable army to win the battle. It shows one thing - that tradition is dynamic; it cannot possibly remain unchanging and unbending. Nontombi talks about running away to the white man's land to seek for deliverance. This shows that some youths are forced to adopt western values simply because African tradition sometimes refuses to accommodate change, based on realities of the day.

Both playwrights have chosen the family as the fulcrum upon which the intricacies and complications of human life are acted out. This shows how important the family is in Africa and also how vulnerable it can be to attacks from selfish power seekers and stark disregard for such changes necessitated by modernity. The family is one of the most threatened institutions in modern society, and in no greater way has this threat been made manifest than through the erosion of morality. The old measures put in place as checks and balances to provide moral upbringing for the new generation have been destroyed by preoccupation with other problems in society. Consequently, the youths are cast adrift without proper guidance and tutelage.

The manner in which these two playwrights have portrayed their heroines is a positive prognosis of future roles of women within the society. These heroines are not superwomen. They are everyday characters that populate our towns and villages. What stands out about them is their courage and determination in the face of adversity. They do not accept their destinies with stoic resignation; rather, despite realizing the stature of their adversaries – the goliath patriarchal society and immutable tradition, they still dare to put up their puny Davidic arms in protest and self-defence.

The determination of both playwrights can be illustrated by a quote from Mary Kolawole,



Sofola has always emphasized the need for African women self-definition. Unapologetically, she created heroines who confronted marginal social space and defied tradition when tradition was a hindrance to self-realisation. (Kolawole: 32)

Both playwrights seem to be saying that it is a shame to live in a world of injustices. Such a world does not deserve to witness the height of joy experienced by newly weds, those who have just woken up to a realization of their humanity and who demand unequivocally for their rights as members of the human race. The heroes and heroines have to die because they challenge the establishment. The establishment is not yet ready to change its old ways; consequently, there is no room for dissenters. However, this is an expression of pessimism. There is a need for a new order - a set of heroes and heroines who would no longer be killed, but be allowed to live, and be given the opportunity to contribute their quota to the making of a new day.

The universal nature of human problems and human desires can be seen in the works of the two playwrights compared. Coming from different parts of the continent, and addressing issues emanating from their immediate environments, it is interesting to note that both women have been able to identify some common themes, which are germane not only to West Africa or Southern Africa, but to all human beings, irrespective of color or creed. Through their plays, the two women have sent out an appeal to humanity to respect basic laws that would help to preserve human dignity and make the society a more egalitarian institution.

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