

A Dramatic Appraisal of Interaction among Women in Wedlock of the Gods

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Preamble

Male chauvinism has been a subject of discourse at both local and international conferences. In some dramatic appraisals, this contempt has also been discussed with intense emotional ferocity. There has also been the tendency to gloss over the volatile issue of the woman being an important factor in perpetuating this problem. Igbinovia in x-raying the role of women in perpetuating widowhood practices in most part of Africa says,

Most widowhood practices are oppressive, dehumanizing and downright wicked. The amazing thing is that these cruel acts are often perpetuated on the widows by their fellow women who perform these rites with sadism. (Igbinovia 2001: 107)

Igbinovia's assertion lends credence to the view that some women contribute to the problems of their fellow women, as they often and willingly present themselves as instruments of affliction on womanhood. This debased role arises from traditional social classification, which degrade women and their functionality in a predominantly patrilineal social set-up. The unquestioning acceptance of this social classification by some 'timid' female folk over the years has not augured well for womenfolk. Some of them have become willing accomplices in afflicting the female-folk with dehumanizing and wicked practices invented by male macho-men.

The traditional conception of the woman which contemporary society is striving to amend or erase is that of subservience. This image has been forcefully inculcated

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into the women folk by both the cultural and religious practices, which are prevalent in African society. Foluke Ogunleye asserts:

Traditionally, the role of the woman is seen as that of a subordinate to the man. They are regarded as incapable of performing roles that require much recourse to intelligence. (Ogunleye 1999:10)

Culturally, and reinforced by religious beliefs and practices, the woman is conceived as a 'property' to be owned by the man. She is therefore, subject to the whims and caprices of the owner, who exploits this religio-cultural bias to advantage. The implication of this, is that the 'voice' of the society is masculine, giving rise to male chauvinism. This creates a social situation where patriarchy becomes the ideal while female self-expression becomes anti-cultural and an aberration. This cultural code of behavior stigmatizes the woman who strives for self-actualisation as a social deviant. Ama Ata Aidoo (1965) in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* is in opposition to this social set-up and expresses it through the character Eulalie, who symbolically announces her rejection of the discriminatory stratification and male chauvinism that keep African women in chains.

Female Subservience

Unfortunately, some women have been pummeled into accepting the 'second class' position in the society. Salami (2001: 148) says, "women were relegated to the background and treated as third class citizens, second only to the sons in the family". The negative effect of this is that the female folk cast aspersion on their counterparts who rise up to challenge this social segregation. The women who desperately fight to break the shackles of bondage are viewed with suspicion and distrust. Their motive misjudged. They are viewed as women without proper moral upbringing, through the smoke screen of oppression, which has been molded by the man, but unfortunately refined, by the women.

The subservient position has remained unchanged over the decades and has created a divide among the women, often resulting in self-pity, defeat, helplessness and hopelessness. Some women feel that fighting against such social injustice amount to 'fighting against God'. Others feel it will result into social chaos; therefore, the status quo should remain. Some prefer to be emotionally and psychologically battered and gradually decay from the inside while blaming the society for their woes. Some also secretly desire to breathe the air of freedom, but are afraid of the repressive society. These various unexpressed feelings sow and nurture the seed of rivalry and envy in the heart of women against their female folk. Rather than team up and work together to uplift the status of women in the society, they fight themselves. Unfortunately, the same group of women laments about male chauvinism, while diverting attention from the real enemy within – the women. By implication, the subservient position of the African woman will remain unchanged, unless the women close-up ranks and summon up the

courage to speak collectively for womanism. J. Tenshak's voice rings out clearly, that if the African woman "must be known, heard and understood, she would have to speak for herself" (Tenshak 2001:161).

Female Gladiators in *Wedlock of the Gods*

The volatile situation in Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* is reinforced by intense personal conflicts in Odibei and Ogwoma. This conflict is propelled by an inner drive for vengeance by Odibei, who feels cheated by the sudden and mysterious death of her son. While Ogwoma, blinded by love, stubbornly makes up her mind to fight against any perceived impediment that would subject her again to any emotional deprivation. In utter defiance of all social norms, she commits adultery in total insensitivity to the grave consequences of her action. In such a situation, both women are portrayed as archenemies, and their running battle becomes the catalyst, which propels the dramatic action in the play to its tragic conclusion.

The conflict situation in the play is precipitated by the action of the male folk. Ibekwe's misconception of the role of women in society results in his turning a deaf ear to Nneka's intuitive vision and counsel against compelling Ogwoma into a forced marriage. Ogwoma's protest is disregarded, and the only choice given to her is to submit to the traditional value that portrays the female gender as a mere 'money minting machine'. The patriarchal concept of inheritance also prize the male gender above the female counterpart in traditional society, which blindfolds Ibekwe from sensing the danger in snatching Ogwoma from her lover and advertising her in the 'market square' for the highest bidder to purchase. The highest bidder turns out to be Adigwu's father, who was attracted by her ravishing beauty and the misconception that she would grow to love his son. However, Odibei sees beyond Ogwoma's physical beauty. Her instinct, warns her against her son's marriage to Ogwoma. She voices it out, but she is brushed aside because women are treated as mere sentimental creatures. C. Chesaini says, "indeed, in traditional and colonial Africa, women's words were regarded as mere noise" (Chesaini 2001:16).

The refusal by the male folk to listen to the wise counsel of the women, sets the pulsating atmosphere of deprivation, distrust and suspicion, which culminates in Ogwoma's adulterous act, and cast aspersion on traditional values. The female combatants, unable to extricate themselves from the evil web spun by traditional values are irresistibly drawn by deep resentment to end up as victims of the time bomb, set by the men. When the time bomb explodes, the women become gladiators, as they ride on different sides of their conception of tradition, while the men act as both instigators and powerless onlookers.

Odibei's quest for vengeance is premised on her suspicion that Ogwoma contrived her son's death. The deep-seated resentment and hatred for Ogwoma was not unexpected,

as Odibei did not hide her distrust for her ever before she was married to her son. Thus, it is a coincidence of fate for Ogwoma's husband to die childless, under mysterious circumstances. This death releases the monster in Odibei and fanned the embers of hatred and feminine jealousy. She then sets out to destroy Ogwoma for killing her son. This vengeful spirit blindfolds her to the reality of the precarious nature of human life that all mortals die. Rather than accept this bitter truth and rise up to the challenges of life, her belief that her son's death was attributable to Ogwoma's unfaithfulness provokes her to embark on a vengeful mission, which leads to catastrophe. Her belief has a cultural basis, for traditionally when a husband dies, he is believed to have been killed by his wife (Kwenta 1999:31). However, when the reverse is the case, the culture becomes silent. This shows a cultural norm that is discriminatory against women.

Beyond her father and the society, Ogwoma contributed to her own problems. Though she resented her forced marriage to Adigwu, the marital rites were legally conducted within the native law and custom. That makes the moral codes, the value systems and role expectation, mandatory for her to live by. She was aware that the mourning rite for three months, had to be performed, that was why she embarked on it. She was also aware of the practice of the leviratic law within the society. Therefore, by freely giving herself to Uloko while in mourning, she violates tradition. She is an adulteress who poses as a liberated lady. But her behavior is unwise; propelled on her by strong will and concept of love, she is adamant in the pursuit of her rights to self-expression in defiance of tradition. Her idea of love, within the rural setting of the time, particularly in a situation where social behavior was guided by the prevalent moral code appears revolutionary. Her behavior is contemptuous of the archaic tradition, which subjects a girl to forced marriage. It is also an expression of womanism in defiance of a tradition, which holds a woman captive but upholds the right of the man. Layiwola (1995) says,

Traditional wisdom classifies womanism as a disadvantaged rival of patriarchy, because patriarchy is legitimized into law in most West African societies.

Ogwoma's stubborn will and distaste for patriarchy, prevents her from considering her action as a revolt against tradition. As far as she is concerned, it is a fight for emancipation from emotional deprivation and the evil chains of traditional bondage. Her intense passion for Uloko pitches her against Odibei. She is brash and boastful of her abilities to contain Odibei's wrath. But when the chips are down, naivety and fear hold her captive. Her stubborn will fails her when she is confronted by the reality of her abominable act. She recoils and concedes defeat after Uloko had disclosed her pregnant state to Odibei.

Ogwoma: (breaking down in Uloko's arms and sobbing) she has caught us. She has got the proof now. I told you to go. I begged you to leave...

Uloko: Don't cry. Let me worry for both of us. I will fight her. She will not harm

you...

Ogwoma: Oh God, where shall I go? I am now in her hands (pp.16-17)

Uloko's tactless taunting of Odibei, portrays him as a domineering and repressive traditional man. He is contemptuous of the female folk, as confirmed by his verbal warfare with Odibei. He is also self assertive and irrational in his emotional disposition. He is further portrayed as touchy, rash, tactless and naive in information management. His witless utterances further provoke Odibei's wrath and seals his lover's fate. Thus, rather than douse, the already tense situation, Uloko's disclosure further aggravates the animosity and hatred between the two women, reinforces Odibei's resolve for vengeance. Below is an extract of their verbal exchange,

Odibei: A Man of your age should be looking for a marriageable young woman for wife instead of posing in the rooms of other people's wives.

Uloko: And not all husbands are husbands. You should have discovered what type of cutlass your son had that even in mourning his wife clings to me.

Odibei: One does not have to see a skunk to smell him. I suspected this dog when her people were hawking her for any available man. I protested enough but my husband saw her as Adigwu's wife. So we took her in and took upon as a curse. (pp.15-16)

It is also important to note that Anwasia's flippancy and subtle reference to Ogwoma's pregnancy and Uloko's immature handling of the information at his disposal, complicated their problem in the play. This single disclosure, perceived to be a violation of tradition and fear of Odibei's wrath, elicits various reactions in the play. The exchanges between Nneka (Ogwoma's mother) and Ogoli (Uloko's mother) confirm this. Both women are subjected to intense pressure, as they become captives of their motherly care for the survival of their children. Nneka, enraged at Uloko's action and affront; inadvertently contributes to the destruction of the couple by invoking irreversible curses on them.

Nneka: You are evil. A man who visits the house of a woman in ashes hides so that people will not see his face. He hides because what he goes to touch has not been cleansed. A man who does such things says nothing about it for others to hear because it is a word that cuts the tongue. But you have said it and said it loudly. And your life will see nothing but misery. That bastard which you have planted in her will not see your face, nor will he taste his mother's milk. You will walk on your head and talk with your anus... (p29)

Thus, in her desperation to save her daughter's life, she unwittingly teams up with Odibei to testify against Ogwoma and Uloko before the gods of the land through those

curses. Ogoli, on her part, accuses Ogwoma of seducing her son, thereby invoking the wrath of the god (pp23-24). Both women become an extension of the problem. Their utterances become testimonies before the gods and authenticate Odibei's claim that Ogwoma had committed sacrilege and offended the gods. This makes Ogwoma a guilty recipient of Odibei's wrath and the verdict of death. Inevitably, the gods are summoned to judge. Ogwoma, irresistibly drawn and guided by metaphysical fingers, walks to her death.

The face-off between Nneka and Ogoli, also portrays the women's inability to resolve their differences and seek for a solution to the problem confronting them. They end up trading blames on their children – that of seducing and bewitching each other. They also issue empty threats to each other, propelled on by the fear of their fellow woman, Odibei's, magical powers. The confrontation between Nneka and Odibei, also ends up the same way, orchestrating self centredness. They are portrayed as insensitive creatures that are partial and unmindful of the pains experienced by their fellow woman. It is the insensitivity in Nneka that further embitters Odibei about the loss of her son. The various confrontations between the women do not yield any positive results, but terminate in the usual rancor, self-centredness, jealousy, rivalry and verbal assaults.

At the end, the male folk look on helplessly, as the engulfing flame of destruction takes its toll on the females. Uloko is unable to save Ogwoma's life as she dies after disclosing that Odibei has drained her life with a magical potion. The rash Uloko proceeds to murder Odibei. He returns, takes the magical potion and dies, frustrating Ibekwe's frantic effort to save his life. The other women are in disarray, still suppressed under the norms of patriarchy. Thus, Ibekwe who believes that women's words should be treated as mere noise is rewarded with human corpses for a harvest. He is made to clear the mess, the disastrous consequences of his misguided and patriarchal quest to save his sons life, through the bride wealth accruing from forced marriage.

Conclusion

The crisis that engulfs Odibei and Ogwoma, arise from the distrust, hate and suspicion among the women. The feminine flippancy by Anwasia in disclosing Ogwoma's pregnant state to Uloko results in a romantic embrace between the lovers that confirms Odibei's suspicion of foul play. This single disclosure becomes the basis for all the verbal war against the women – Odibei and Ogwoma, Nneka and Ogoli, Nneka and Ogwoma, Ogoli and Ogwoma and Nneka and Odibei. At the end, the women are worse off, as Odibei and Ogwoma's death become a mere wastage of human lives in the face of the patriarchal practice, which thrives in the play. If this trend must change in contemporary times, then women need to stop fighting each other. It is only when they are able to overcome the enemy within that they can effectively tackle the problems of patriarchy and lack of self-actualisation.

Women must fully realize the negative effect of patriarchy and reject the subservient position and image forced upon them by traditional social structures. They should collectively re-assess and re-define the traditional value system and seek to re-socialize the society to be more favorably disposed towards women. They should stop fighting themselves and support each other in the pursuit of various attainable goals; refuse to be used as agents of perpetuating violence against their female counterparts in the society; and as a team, fight for the abrogation of denigrating practices, whether cultural or religious which portray women as slaves or second class citizens. There is also a need to understand each other better, encourage the development of self-importance and integrity, and cultivate the virtues of womanhood, which will enhance their self-expression. Finally, women must realize that they cannot exist in isolation but deliberately set out to win the respect of the male folk as they play their complimentary roles in the society.

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