





## **A Call for Change: Traditional African Value and Modern Africa in the Play *the Broken Calabash* by Tess Osonye Onwueme**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Broken Calabash*, is a play that, explores, the themes of modernity against the decadent traditional African value system (of the caste order, where the individual conviction of genuine love for another person reign supreme), in spite of, traditional attitude of discrimination against the out caste. Ona, a female undergraduate and an only daughter and child of her parents, is an Idegbe. Idegbe is the name given to an only daughter and child of a marriage in Ogwashi Uku clan of the Delta State. She is expected not to be married out, but, to remain at home to propagate their lineage. However, she has the choice of marrying another female; into the family, to take up her role of child bearing. Her modern concept of freedom of will, independence and individualism render this alternative unsavory. To Ona, marrying Diaku an "Osu", (an Osu is an outcast, a person, not recognized as a bonafide member of a community he claims to come from, he has no freedom to participate or associate with other members of his claimed community. He is dedicated to serve the gods) would help her succeed in breaking this ossified and decadent tradition. This paper highlights these issues and argues for the freedom of choice for the female, in support of Onwueme's views. It is hoped that, readers, especially the traditionally minded ones will come to terms with this innovation. The paper suggests that, it is time to do away with those unprogressive traditional norms that deny the individual the right to choice and association as a person. Therefore, women must have a right to choice in the society, for the purpose of collective and sustainable societal development.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tess Onwueme creates a social awareness of the shortcomings of some African tradition and the patriarchal order through the play, *The Broken Calabash*. The play dwells on old, traditional African values. The play openly calls for an empowerment of the womenfolk against oppressive norms and customs in African society. In trying to convince Ona to accept "Idegbe",

Oliaku, Ona's mother recalls: "My parents gave me to your father, as wife. I didn't have to choose him. But you have choice..."

Ona: Between my father and who?

Oliaku: No, not between your father and anybody. But, a choice, to bear children for your father alone or marry a wife who can help bear children to multiply the stock (pp.108 – 109).

This confirms Christie Achebe's assertion that the African woman's traditionally prescribed role is procreation, the making of babies; she is a machine for producing children. This view also lends credence to the views of Marie Rosa Cutrifelli in *Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression*, that Women's domestic role and the so called feminine personality are combined to encourage cultural definitions of the female that tend to be degrading "...she is subordinated controlled and manipulated in the services of culture's ends" (8 – 9). But, Ona counters this because, she realizes that she has a self which is separated from tradition, she states; "Anything that cannot stand the force of change must be uprooted" (*The Broken Calabash*, p.112). Aso a male character in Elechi Amadi's novel, *The Slave* confirms Ona's statement when he alludes; "It is true that marriage is an affair between families, but that time has past, when the man and the woman involved were not expected to have a say"(95). The play reveals that, the individual must forcefully seek after change, and any obstruction to that effect must be uprooted. Ona's father's overbearing love clashes violently with her quest for independence from the shackles of inflexible traditional norms. At the end of the play, Ona fakes pregnancy and names her father as responsible for it. Courtuma, Ona's father commits suicide to end the embarrassment. This action puts to death the old African values in the play.

This is unlike Ahurole and Enaa in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* and *The Slave*, Ada in Emecheta's *The Second Class Citizen*, Ebla in Nurrudin Farah's *From a Crooked Rib* these women were compromised to marriage in order to satisfy the traditional laws. This is an issue that the African traditional woman is saddled with -procreation and the making of babies, for the continuity of her lineage. As the scene above reveals, the resistance and protest by Ona is centered on marriage and procreation. Childbearing is regarded as a woman's primary and noblest function and in fact, the reason for having women in African traditional context. A woman who is not able to fulfill this role is seen as not having the moral justification to exist, even in marriage.

In view of this, the importance attached to child bearing, an African feminist, Tola Adeniyi asserts "... it is unfortunate that procreation is seen as the reason for our existence" (p.4). This explains Anowa's grief in *Anowa* by Ama Ataidoo and the worries of Esikom in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* over Eulalie's barrenness. This same fear is expressed by Ona's mother in *The Broken Calabash* "... marry a wife who can help bear children and multiply the stock" (p. 109) is her advice to Ona against the bondage from obsolete tradition which her mother accepts. Oliaku believes and supports Courtuma's (Ona's father) view over Ona. Ona insists that the knots tied in her life must

be untied as she is not ready to be in perpetual bondage. She questions the rationale upon which she cannot marry the man she loves "... if your sole aim is to make me remain at home and breed children for you, why did you chase Diaku away? Or must I not also love whoever must give me children?" (p.109). She rebels against the tradition that inhibits her from actualizing her dreams. All this she did, while rejecting the choice of marrying a wife to help propagate the lineage or stay at home to bear children by her father.

Onwueme's vision in this matter is that a tradition that propagates prostitution or dehumanizes, or subjugates the woman because of her gender should be regarded as an obsolete tradition and therefore expunged from the society. Ona's revolt is to be free from the patriarchal attitude which transcends personal pursuit to collective freedom for the womenfolk, this brings to mind Chikwenye Ogunyemi's assertion that womanism seeks after the freedom of the woman like feminism.

Ona reasons that the choice to marry a wife to propagate the lineage is another form of enslavement for the woman. She explains to her parents, "you people have a very ambitious murder plan. You will not only slaughter me on the altar of your decadent tradition, but would also want another female head. I say to hell with your traditional, homestead! Norm!..." (p.109). Ona is bold and defiant. She rejects and resists both options open to her. This is a feminist stance which Judith Bardwick affirms is "an implicit rejection of the life style created by strongly coercive norms..."(5). By so doing, Ona rejects subjugation and slavery to the traditional institution, norms and patriarchal attitudes that mitigate against self-fulfillment of the womenfolk. Self fulfillment is one of the tenets of feminism/ womanism, and this idea runs through the play. She explains to her parents that what they ask of her is "... obsolete!! ...What we need is to disentangle some of the areas that make things too rigid and unmanageable..."(p.85), Onwueme's vision is that those aspects of the tradition that stagnate and are unprogressive to the society should be discarded and replaced with modern values that make for progress.

To ensure a perpetual continuation of homestead, Courtuma uses various means to placate Ona to accept the traditional norms of the land. He was all over her at all times especially when she is with her friends. Ona revolts thus; "but must all my life revolve around him ...? So circumscribed by him? Must I never live my life independent of him? Must he always leave his mark on me? At school, it is father. At home, father! ... why can't I be independent?..." (pp.88-91), this human propensity to dominate another gives credence to Kate Millet's assertion that "human relationships are power structured with male symbol of power dominating female symbol of powerless" ("Independent Woman..."3-4)

Courtuma overprotects Ona and holds Ona dear to his heart, little wonder the pain he passes through when Ona names him as responsible for her pregnancy. He laments, "Ona! Ona! Oh, my love has choked me. The stick I chew in my mouth has choked me Ona, Ona, Ona...(p.115). Courtuma's affection for both Ona and the tradition have deprived Ona of her freedom and of her desire to live a self fulfilled life. She questions. "... Is that why

you must tear me apart ...” (p.109). Ona in this regard sees that her sex as a woman is undermined, and her right to her own life annihilated. Defiant against the choices offered to her by tradition, she informs her parents “...The fact that you gave me life does not mean that you must control it... (p.109). Ona in this regard is presented as a girl child who knows what she wants in life. This also shows that, for one to succeed in gaining freedom one must know what he or she wants in life.

#### **ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY - *THE BROKEN CALABASH***

Onwueme depicts the old African tradition where a female child is deprived a self-fulfilled life because she is an **Idegbe** and therefore has to see to the propagation of her father’s lineage. Also the issue of ‘Osu’ an Igbo out-cast system as an obsolete and decadent tradition needs re-examination for social change. Speaking through the protagonist Onwueme argues that such practices are mere superstitious beliefs, and that a change should be effected. Ona argues thus:

...if I’m kept at home to bear children for my father or marry a wife, either way, it won’t be pure blood. Which child is born from pure blood of his family anyway? Even if you had a son and he had an exogamous marriage the blood will even be less pure. Tell me father and mother, if you graft an orange seedling into a grape-fruit seedling; is the offspring still the same pure orange or grapefruit? (p.110).

This is a question Onwueme leaves for her audience, readers and society to answer. However, Courtuma himself is aware that the tradition has become stringent, and as such its practical implementation could be harmful:

Times are changing and we must not pretend as if the harmattan wind cannot char our skin too. Ona has acquired the Whiteman’s knowledge and wisdom which is good for us in many respects. But at times our customs are too entrenched, for old to bend or be married to the new ways (p. 83).

Because of Courtuma’s loyalty to the patriarchal order, he insists on using the tradition as a rope with which to tie his daughter. But Ona is schooled and knows her rights as a person entitled to her own life style in spite of the norms set against her by the patriarchal order. Hence her resolve to assert herself, “Leave me alone! Do I not see my mates? Am I to live my life unfulfilled just because I am your only daughter and you have some obsolete tradition”? (p.108). She becomes more aware of the deprivation and damage the tradition is to cause her. This she reasons arises from her sex as a woman. In other words, it is the sex that determines the right and obligations which a society assigns to an individual. Through Courtuma’s explanation, we see that any African patriarchal society sees an only female child under the tradition of **Idegbe** as sustainer of the homestead, “... your children or your wife must answer your father’s name. If you are kept at home, any man coming to you knows... already and can never claim paternity of the children” (p.110). Ona’s resistance to tradition may well represent Imoh

Emenyi's points that "the self conscious woman in literature is often regarded by male elites as an individual who is corrupted by Western civilization..."( 49).

Ona is to become a sex slave in order to procreate and protect the homestead, thus satisfying the patriarchal order. She is to accept the domination of her father and at the same time, the domination of other male partners, whom she must welcome at her own expense. She questions the morale behind this patriarchal attitude. "...The system indirectly encourages prostitution,... so, the order is prostitution simply because society does not sanction it,... even though, it is the same process that is involved" (p.110). Onwueme's vision here is to expose those traditional norms and values which encourage the injustices done to women. Such practices breed moral decadence in women and the society in general. Through Ona, Onwueme calls for a total rejection of these norms and values especially in this time of AIDS.

Ona rebels against patriarchal authority. She refused to be subjugated by tradition. She insists on her enlistment from an **Idegbe** to a self willed woman. Onwueme succeeds in building in Ona: "self worth, independence, boldness...inner strength and resilience" (Emelia Oko, 88). The question is, should Ona yield to the persistent pleas of her father? Should she sacrifice her happiness to the propagation of decadent tradition? Should she lose Diaku and at the same time be deprived of self fulfillment? Or should she just submit to the patriarchal order as her mother did? Ona's response to the above questions gives birth to the theme of the play *The Broken Calabash* - a resistance to old traditional values and the acceptance of new (modern) values for the growth of the society.

At the climax of Ona's resistance, she becomes very bold and assertive. And this is when she realizes that she has lost Diaku, a man she loves and cherishes, to her own friend, Ugo. She is embittered hence the decision to revenge on her father with the following statement, "my father has at last succeeded in ruining my life...I will show him..." (p.112).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Courtuma's quest to protect his homestead ends in a tragedy. He pleads with Ona, but Ona is determined and resolute in her reply "... you're the father of my child, you asked for it and you got it" (p.115). To end the embarrassment the tradition challenges her with, she lies against her father, thereby causing him to commit suicide, to gain her own freedom. *Courtuma walks back into the room and begins to exit into the bush part in the village... He pulls off her beads, drops them on the floor at Ona's feet looking very pensive... Ona picks up the beads,* p.115, a symbol of the tradition which Courtuma drops at Ona's feet before committing suicide. By this gesture, he submits the tradition to Ona to do what she deems fit with the tradition. Courtuma's death marks the death of the old order. Onwueme

empowers the women to shake off (since the men have failed on their part to embrace modernity) those aspects of the patriarchal order that hinder self fulfillment.

Finally, Ona is however, equipped with the instrument for social change that is prevalent in contemporary Africa. Personal power and satisfaction mean a lot to the modern woman for as Judith Bardwick reports it is; "The sense of confidence that resides in oneself, that comes from one's maturity and self-respect. Personally powerful people are, strong because their sense of self is based on their acceptance of themselves" (79). The paper calls for a change and a resistance against obsolete tradition. The tradition itself is weak and not strictly adhered to by those who claim to propagate it. The patriarchal attitude is replete to change (resistance to change). The paper calls for outright rejection of the old order of stringent patriarchal attitudes, which subjugate and annihilate the individual, especially the women. This is why Wole Soyinka asserts that change is a must for any growing society. The rigidity of our norms and values in the face of modern ideas and the culture needs to be replenished with changing society as Otu Agada a character in the play observes "...The rhythm of a dance changes, the steps change too... we cannot pretend that, we don't know when darkness overtakes light" (p.102). In other words, there is a great need for the society to accept progressive change. As the society is growing, so also is change taking place, no society is static. The outdated patriarchal order must give way to the modern progressive order for the purpose of growth.

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