

Re-Presenting the feminist struggle: A reading of Emeka Nwabueze's *The dragon's funeral*

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Abstract

*Over the years, gender discourse and women agitations have been conceived globally as protests and fight for female dominance and male subjugation. By way of reframing this narrative, African womanhood struggle elucidates antecedents that present female gender struggle and agitations as protests aimed at correcting anomalies such as oppressive conditions that affect the female folk and the society at large. This paper thus investigated the motive behind the Aba Women protest of 1929 as represented in the play *The Dragon's Funeral* by Emeka Nwabueze, using the content analysis approach of qualitative research method for data collection and analysis. This analysis is anchored on Omolara, Ogundipe-Leslie's *Stiwanism*. The study revealed that the protest was purely influenced by communal interest born out of the feminine nature of complimenting their spouses for a better society. The paper therefore recommended that feminist activism should not be seen as a threat or fight for female supremacy, rather it should be seen as a struggle for the liberation of the entire society; male and female alike.*

Keywords: *feminism, women revolution, gender inequality, gender supremacy*

Introduction

Drama remains a veritable platform deployed by playwrights either to affirm or negate contemporary social issues such as

feminism or feminist activism. The presentation of women and women struggle in Nigerian plays differs according to individual playwright's perception of feminism and its related agitations. Thus where some dramatists present them in low light as passive hangers on, cultural slaves and naive, others present women as a group of people with special talents capable of changing every oppressive circumstances to their advantage and that of the larger society, and at the same time upholding their struggles as service for the masses and not for personal gain. Hence Amaefula (2019) observed that in *The Dragon's Funeral*, Nwabueze "projects women's protest in drama as not only a panacea for problems that affect them but also a determinant of gender performance and changing identities".

Feminism is a collection of movements seeking and defending the rights of women, economically, socially and politically. It is a movement that focuses on the daily experiences of women and in essence seek to remove barriers Schneider (2000) defines it as as a movement concerned "not simply with the social, political and economic equality of women with men but with a fundamental reimagination of the whole of humanity in relation to whole of reality including non- human creation". The first agitation for women right was channelled against what was referred to as private patriarchy. This was followed by another wave of feminism aimed at political emancipation of women. This second wave of feminism witnessed such feminist schools of thought as radical feminism, liberal feminism and social feminism. The third wave of feminist movement emerged around 1990s. According to Patmen, (1998), this period:

Emerged from a conglomeration of feminist seeks
to recognise the character of gender inequality

by investigating women's gender roles as lived experiences; it has cultivated theories in a number of disciplines so as to respond to such issues as the construction of sex and gender by the human society

This new wave of feminism did not restrict itself to politics and social rights of women, rather It encourages women to be actively involved in every domain.

It is a popularly acclaimed tradition in Nigeria and Africa, at large, that women are financially, intellectually and physically dependent on the male folk. This restrictive belief was one of the issues that ignited the feminist movement aimed at rejecting the limitations placed on women. It is quite unfortunate that women's struggle to liberate themselves from this restriction is being misconcieved as struggle for supremacy over men. Helen Chukwuma, quoted in Odinye and Odinye,(2010), in an attempt to clear this misconception defines feminism as a rejection of inferiority and struggle for recognition... It seeks to give women a sense of worth, effective and contributing human being. Accordingly, Tina chanter (2006), presumes that feminists are not striving to be the equal of the oppressed or disenfranchised or disadvantaged men. In addition to this, Steady, (1981) opines that the essence of (African) feminism is not hatred for men or lowering men, some of which are also agents of oppression ... True feminism is reaction which leads to greater resourcefulness for survival and greater self-reliance. This perception has been the bone of contention behind the equality struggle associated with female liberation that attracts the gender war being witnessed currently in the society. In line with the above, Hooks(2003), contends that feminism does not privilege women

over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. Most importantly, feminism is neither a life style nor a readymade identity or role one can step into.

The society is made up of male and female, each having a complimentary role to play in order to represent the society. Thus Omonubi-McDonnell (2003) asserted that “the paradigm of African feminism evolved from the assumptions of men and women as a unit neither of which can survive without the other”. In accordance with the above, Ayika (2021), contends that:

The dignity of women is the dignity common to men and women but the woman is special especially in the area of gift of self, in the area of transmitting life. It is in this gift of self that the woman discovers herself as a mother. This complete gift of self only happens as a result of marital union of husband and wife in order to attain all its significance. Therefore, the dignity of women and that of the men are tied together

Records of women struggles aimed at correcting acts of discriminations, negligence relegation and violence in Nigeria go beyond feminism. In Igbo land southeast region of Nigeria for instance, the role of the ‘Umuada’ cannot be over emphasised. This group of women is a formidable force to reckon with both in the political, social or even religious issues in Igbo society. The mere threat of reporting a case to the Umuada in Igbo society is enough to restore sanity in a chaotic situation. No sane person, man or woman would want to have any score to settle with the Umuada. This is possible because as Nzegwu rightly puts it "Umuada never occupy an inferior, subordinate position in their

lineage. They are never viewed as less intelligent, less moral, less competent, less able physically, psychologically and spiritually, small of body, mind and character" Green (1995) further observed that these women acted as political pressure group in their natal villages in order to achieve objectives. They stopped quarrels and prevented wars. So powerful was their reputation that their villages had to reckon with their possible reactions to every major decision.

In the western and northern parts of the country, the case is not different as women are reported to have such powers as to unseat a defiant ruler. Asserting to this, Ngozi Orjiakor (2009), states that historical narratives have shown that women played prominent roles in ruler-ship, abating crises and were instruments of social control. Nkama (2019) added that during the colonial era, women in The southern region of Nigeria, played outstanding roles in the societies collectively and individually.

The idea behind every agitation is to resist the imposition of undue influence on a group of people, feminism inclusive. During the colonial era, the Nigerian society witnessed a fair share of female agitations against the autocratic colonial administration. prominent among these agitations was the Aba women's riot of 1929. Others include the Lagos market women association agitation of 1940-1941. This association was the first mass-based women interest group in Lagos area. Worthy of mention is the Abeokuta women union, which in 1947, led by Fumilayo Ransom Kuti, demanded the abdication of the Alake Ademola and the abolition of the Sole Native Authority system of the colonial masters. These anti-colonial resistance groups formed by women later led to the formation of National Women's Union, the first organisation in Nigeria that comprised of Women representation

from almost all the ethnic, religious and social class in Nigeria. This later metamorphosed into Fedration of Nigerian Women Society (FNWS). Records have it that these women played prominent roles in the struggle for Nigeria's independence.

In recent times, women agitation has taken a new dimension that seems to present itself as a threat to the survival of the male folk. This is as a result of the fact that the Nigerian society is patterned along gender lines leading to a situation where men control women. Like in all patriarchal society, Nigerian women have to fight for their right to be heard and for basic human rights and in the process, as it seems, incur the wrath of the male folk. To this end, this paper set to investigate the real reason behind women agitations and struggles as portrayed in the play, *The dragon's funeral* by Emeka Nwabueze.

Theoretical concept

The paper is anchored within the theoretical concept of Molora Ogundipe-Leslie's STIWANISM that agrees that African women do not view men as their primary enemy. According to Ogundipe-Leslie (1994):

Stiwa means social transformation including women of Africa. I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It is not about waring with men...The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest

The idea behind this struggle is that social, economic, and political process of change can only be sustained by involving the

full participation of all members of the society irrespective of gender, pooling their resources together for development of the society. This implies that every society that needs to achieve positive development should encourage full participation and cooperation of both the men and the women in the process.

The dragon's Funeral

Written in 2005, the play represents a dramatic presentation of the first recorded public display of female gender resistance in Nigeria. Using the story telling technique, Nwabueze re-enacts the remote causes of the Aba Women revolution by commenting on the activities of the key actors of the revolution led by Adaugo Nwanyereuwa. The women are fighting the exploitative legislations of the colonial administration and the local warrant chiefs who are their accomplices. The main conflict is the introduction of female taxation which the women believe will increase the hardship already being witnessed due to the previous tax system introduced by the colonial administration. The women have been struggling to make ends meet with the hardship they are subjected to by the colonial administrators as a result of the unjust taxation imposed on their husbands, only to be informed that they will be included in the taxation law. This prompts them to organise themselves, with the help of Adaugo Nwanyereuwa, to form a resistance force to fight the colonial authority. Their persistence and doggedness in the struggle prompted the colonial administration to drop the planned taxation and at the same time curb the excesses of the warrant chiefs who have been fleecing on the ignorant village people.

The play opens in the market place where some women are about to close for the day. They sing a folkloric song

demonstrating their attitude to themselves and the society at large. In the course of their song, Ekwedike, the village story teller, enters, and the song reminds him of what happened in the market long time ago. This prompts him to tell the story of this valiant woman who, with the help of her fellow women, forced the colonial administration to stop the taxation of women and depose the warrant chief they use to carry out their activities.

Feminist struggle in *The dragon's funeral*.

Traditionally in Nigeria and most parts of Africa, women are regarded to be financially, physically, intellectually and even socially dependent on men. They are meant to be seen not heard. It is therefore not surprising in the play to see that when the women start to organise themselves, they receive antagonism from their husbands. This is observable the following conversation:

Dike: where are you going?

Ikodie: My husband, shall we go through this again this morning? I thought we have already discussed it.

Dike: Discussed what?

Ikodie: The women's meeting. We have a meeting today at the Orié market.

Dike: About what?

Ikodie: Need we go over the matter again?

Dike: Yes. That's the new image of women of this land. That is the result of your meetings. You know how to throw words at me.
(51)

This portrays the plight of women in a patriarchal society like Nigeria where they have to fight for their rights to be heard and for basic human right. As such when these women begin to manifest the great potentials stored up in them, their male counterparts begin to feel threatened. The play also captures the reason behind this fear as seen in the lines below:

Ikodie: You men believe you are strong. No one argues that. But why are you always afraid of women holding their own meeting?

Dike: Because they will not know the limits of their sense; because they will destroy the structure of the system; because it is not their duty to do so; because no sane person will engage in an action forbidden by his ancestors. (52)

Gender stereotype plays a major role in the misconception of the female agitations as it reduces women to mere commodity that is meant to be seen and never to be heard, no matter how relevant their opinion may be. This can be seen in the following dialogue:

Ikodie ...(Thinks) But come to think of it, don't you think that women have a right to hold meetings, a right to decide on how to handle certain issues?

Dike: No! The place of women is in the home. It is the duty of men who know better to decide for the women. This idea of women holding their own meeting without moderation by men will destroy this community.

Men's obstinate attachment to traditional beliefs when it comes to women and their refusal to accept changes are contributing negatively to their acceptance of the feminine agitations. These

blind them and make them not to see reason for the feminine movement. Excerpt:

Ikodie: Time changes everything my husband...

Dike: Time can never change a woman into a man. What a man sees sitting down may not be seen by a woman even if she stands on top of a mountain.

Ikodie: ...I just can't understand your fears. Have I not been doing my duties effectively as wife and mother?...

Dike: I say you won't attend that meeting. By the way, who is the husband here? (52-53).

Women's participation in politics, economic and religious affairs of the society has always been dreaded by men simply because they fear that their superiority will be undermined. Dike's resistance is born out of this fear that that if given the opportunity to handle their issues by themselves, the respect accorded to the men will be relegated to the background by women.

The playwright uses his experienced knowledge of the African culture to educate the society that what these women are fighting for is not actually aimed at the male folk, neither is it an attempt at insubordination. Adaugo admonishes the women thus:

Adaugo: Now I want to make one thing clear to all of you. Once we start, there's no going back. Our aim is not to fight our husbands. Our aim is not to confront men unnecessarily, even if they are strangers. Our aim is not to show that we are indispensable to men. In executing our actions, we should ensure that we don't fail in our duties as wives, as daughters, as mothers, as the epitome of peace in our community. Our aim is to fight

injustice, to fight for our rights, to fight for our children. As we have to do what we feel is right even if men try to stop us(24).

The play reverberates with a strong statement on the justification for the women movement. The men of the community are unable to protest against the tax system imposed by the colonial administration. The women seeing themselves as the last option decide to take up arms against the oppressive government that has made life unbearable in the entire community. Ikodie narrates thus:

Ikodie: ... You men should go and educate yourselves. You say you married us because we're weak, because we need protection but now you're incapable of protecting us. That demon called government exploits your physical labour and you don't complain. Now, he's counting your property. One day he will even ask for your wives and children and you will comply. (55).

The playwright indicts the male folk of neglecting their responsibility of protecting the family by questioning their attitude towards the activities of the oppressive colonial administration. Hence the women had to fight where the men failed. This is captured by Ikodie:

Ikodie: Look at the whole town, there is no peace, there is fear everywhere, and you men do nothing about it. And you call yourselves men. You cancel your meetings any time because government wants you to work for him. you abandon farm work, and your children suffer the pains of hunger. How can you call yourself a man when there is no food in the house? When there is no peace in your community (55).

Nwabueze goes on to reveal that the subjugation alarm being raised by the male folk whenever women gather together to handle issues is sometimes ignited by jealousy and inferiority complex. In what appears like the echo of the feminist struggle, the women brazenly justify their resourcefulness. Dike seeing how successful the women agitation is turning to be laments:

Dike: I want these women to succeed. But if they eventually succeed where we failed, where we never even dared a fight, how can we be their masters? The world is coming to an end this inversion of power disturbs me (71).

When men see women merely as sex object, they tend to associate every female movement as war against the opposite sex not minding the objective of such movement. Nwabueze (2011), tactfully addresses this in the play in the conversation bellow:

Kalu: what is happening here? I heard your voices from the compound gate. Can't you keep your voices low when you quarrel about such things?

Dike : About what thing?

Kalu : About a man being a man. (laughs) Dike, I didn't know that the power of your manhood is in question. Manhood that has produced six children. (Laughs heartily)

Dike : My friend this is not a laughing matter. Something bigger than the cricket threatens to drive it out of its hole. But it cannot happen in this house. Unless my name is is not Dike, the dogged stone that blunts the hoe.

Ikodie: Big name that kills a puppy! That's the problem with you men. See where your mind goes. That is not what determines a man. A woman is not a woman merely because she bears children (54-55)

The play is a clarion call on the need to allow women the opportunity to contribute to the development of the community without attributing it to supremacy struggle. Ikodie explains this to her husband:

Ikodie: I am not throwing words at you. I just want you to understand that the meeting has nothing to do with seeking equality with men. It is concerned with empowering women to take care of their own affairs in a world that is not prepared to protect them. (51).

Women in Nigeria have proven to be active contributors to nation building. Their outstanding contributions have been felt in almost all sectors of the society. The play sets out to inform the public of the need to allow women to freely contribute their quota without any fear of dominance since such contributions benefit everyone. Ikodie reminds her husband of her contributions towards the welfare of the family in the following words:

Ikodie: I believe I've done my duty as a wife and mother. I have swallowed all your insults despite the fact that you couldn't have taken the traditional title if I wasn't such an enterprising trader (53).

It is an established fact that revolutions do not occur in isolation. They are accumulation of bottled up grievances traceable to injustice and suppression. The play portrays a group of women who have been pushed to the wall. Women who are left with no other option than to fight for their survival. This confirms feminist struggle as agitation against oppression and injustice. According to Adaugo:

Adaugo: Cruelty occurs when a person deliberately inflicts suffering on another and relishes it, especially when he considers the person less advantaged than himself...Look at what the government is doing to us. They confiscate our land, they impose their administration on us, and now they want to tax us when we don't even have enough to feed our children. They have pushed us to the wall and there is no going back (64).

Just like all other female agitations, the fight initiated by the women in the play should have been avoided if the women are not provoked. Adaugo has earlier warned the women not to fight until they are provoked. Excerpt:

Adaugo: Go in peace, my sister. Remember that we don't fight until we are provoked. And once provoked, nobody will stand on our way, not even the shrines of the community (64)

In the heat of the uprising, the men seeing the determination the women exhibit, express their surprise thus:

Dike: your wife was leading those recalcitrant women. You promised to go home and prevent her from participating in the uprising, to teach her a lesson.

Kalu: ... it is the way a child whistles that determines how well he can play the flute. These women mean business and I don't want to be a victim.

Dike: Come to think of it, Kalu, I think these women are right. Somebody needs to tell the government that they have taken more than they are allowed; that we are neither stones nor wood but people (70)

Dike's submission in the above conversation underscores the need for male support to female struggle. Because as Omonubi-

McDonnell (2003), observed, the paradigms of African feminism evolved from assumptions of men and women as a unit neither of which can survive without the other. Revolutions tend to usher in positive change for all. It does not matter who leads it, provided it is justified. The Aba women Riot was a success to every member of the community. The women did not benefit alone from it. Their demand at the District Officer's residence testifies to this:

Adaugo: We are simple people but not simpletons. our cause is not yet fulfilled. We know the difference between victory and success. Go back and tell the District Officer to declare in writing that women will never be taxed, that the counting of people and farm products should stop immediately. Tell him to write down that forced labour should stop and that women should be consulted before any decision affecting them is concluded. Let him write it down so we can preserve it as an agreement between the government and us (76).

The above demand gives credibility that African women liberation ideology seeks emancipation from all forms of oppression. As Hooks (2003), rightly puts it, feminism does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. In the play, the women are fighting for the welfare of their family. The demands they presented are all geared towards the benefit of both men and women alike.

Conclusion

Dramatists have been significant commentators on social issues, thus drama plays significant role in every societal discourse. By adapting the historic Aba Women Riot into drama, Nwabueze

succeeds in bringing the story closer to the people; and by so doing sends the message of feminist activism across to the people.

This paper is an attempt to highlight the contributions of Emeka Nwabueze's *The dragon's funeral* in re-defining the feminist discourse in Nigeria. The paper affirmed the play as a testament that female agitations and movements in Nigeria are not necessarily a fight for gender supremacy. Using the play scenario, the study observed that the Aba Women riot is not a fight for female emancipation and domination, rather it is a fight against societal oppression. The study therefore submitted that the fear of supremacy and domination should be removed by men from female agitations for the society to fully benefit from the contributions of women in its development process. It recommends that more plays clarifying the motive behind female agitations and movements, especially in Africa be written to allay the fear that female struggles and agitations are fight for female dominance over men.

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