

WOLE SOYINKA'S THE LION AND THE JEWEL: A DISTORTION OF FEMALE IMAGE

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Abstract

The inequalities that exist between men and women in all spheres of life have generated a lot of interest both at national and international levels. With regards to women issue, for socio-economic and political change, a lot of seminars, conventions, conferences were held in various places. This paper attempts to discuss feminism from African perspective and Soyinka's distortion of female image in The Lion and the Jewel.

Keywords: Distortion, female, socio-economic, feminism

Introduction

African feminism is not a clear cut concept that can be precisely defined. This problem of definition does not deny the existence of African feminism, but acknowledges the complexities denoted by being an African and a feminist at once. An attempt is made to define African feminism as essentially two things. It is a theoretical paradigm in social theory that seeks to advocate and enhance women emancipation in a predominantly patriarchal world. It is also a movement that mobilises for women's emancipation and equality with regards to gender. (Sachikonye 2010)

As a movement, feminism mobilises for productive rights, affordable health care and improved working conditions among many other causes. (Okome 1999, cited in Sachikonye 2010) notes that in most feminist writings, African women are portrayed as confused, powerless and unable to determine for themselves both the changes in their lives and means to construct these changes. He also notes that Western feminists usually act as superiors who seek to help and enlighten African women.

The status of African women

African women have always been active in agriculture, trade, and other economic pursuits, but a majority of them are in the informal labour forces. In 1985, women's shares in African labour forces ranged from 17 percent to 49 percent in Mali, Mozambique, and Tanzania. (World Bank, 1989) African women are guardians of their children's welfare and have explicit responsibility to provide for them materially. They are the household managers, providing food, nutrition, water, health, education, and family planning to an extent greater than elsewhere in the developing world.

In Nigeria, it is the same situation. During pre colonial era, Nigerian economy was at a subsistence level, yet, Nigerian women participated actively in this economy. Apart from being mothers and wives and taking charge of the domestic sector, women contributed immensely in the production and distribution of goods and services.

In the agricultural sector, women farmed along side with husband and children. In some areas women also took part in production of palm oil and palm kernel. They also participated in a trade in different parts of Nigeria. They are

also involved in food processing, for example, fish drying, garri processing, etc. In the eastern part of Nigeria, women were active in salt production (Attoe 2002).

Nigerian women provided health care in pre colonial era, and religious services. Most traditional religions feature females as earth goddesses. Women were also considered as priestesses, diviners, healers, etc (Attoe 2002).

Under pre colonial era customary laws were in most Nigerian societies. Women were considered as free adults, at the same time, certain limitations were imposed, which subordinated them to male authority (Attoe 2002).

Education in pre colonial time was functional. It helped women to learn a skill in order to earn a living. A woman who was without a craft or trade, or who was totally dependent on her husband, was not only rare but was regarded with contempt (Aliyu 1992 cited in Attoe, 2002).

In politics, women in pre colonial period were part of the political set up of their communities. Most often, they had separate functions from men and these functions were fully complementary. In pre colonial Bornu for instance women played active part in the administration of the state. They held very important offices in the royal family, including the offices of the Megira (the queen mother) and the Gunsu (the first wife of the Mai or king) (Ola 1976 cited in Attoe, 2002).

It is appropriate to say that Nigerian women in a pre colonial period had played a vital role in the development of their societies.

During the colonial period, the colonial economy seriously undermined the prestige of the traditional occupations of Nigerian women. While it placed women at a great disadvantage, it enhanced the economic status

of the British, Lebanese, Syrian and a few male Nigerian merchants (Attoe 2002). Many of the smaller markets that were dominated and controlled by women gradually disintegrated as a result of the emergence of expatriates firms such as John Holt, United African Company (UAC), Lever Brothers, etc. Women were denied loan in order to boost their economic status (Attoe 2002).

In agriculture, cash crop incentives, technology and innovations were restricted to men, (Curtin 1964 cited in Attoe: 2002). Colonial policies and statutes were clearly sexist and biased against women.

Even though the educational system was functional during the colonial time, women were only restricted to domestic aspect in the curriculum which only enable them learn to be good housewives, while boys were placed to learn religious instructions and clerical skills. (Attoe 2002).

As regards politics, colonialism affects Nigerian women seriously as very few of them were offered any political or administrative appointments. Such women include Chief (Mrs) Olunfunmilayo Ransomekuti, Chief (Mrs) Margret Ekpo and Jenet Mokelu in 1950s. (Attoe 2002).

The status of women in the Lion and the Jewel

The Lion and the Jewel (1963) is a play written by Wole Soyinka, and it is the main stream of this paper.

Upon all the contributions of women in the development of the nation (Nigeria) as mentioned before, they are denied socio-economic and political opportunities. In most of the literary writings, women are also pushed to the background. You find that the role reserve for women is mostly a degrading one, for instance, in the Lion and the Jewel,

Soyinka presents women in a degrading picture. Women with little brain to understand simple thing, as in the case of Sidi, a female central character in the play (L&J) and Lakunle a male central character also in the same play who tags Sidi as a woman with smaller brain than him, since she refuses to marry him unless he pays the bride price:

Lakunle: A natural feeling, arising out of envy; for as a woman, you have smaller brain than mine (Soyinka 1963: 4).

And when Lakunle senses that Sidi is not happy with his attitude, instead of consoling her, he worsen the situation by saying,

Lakunle: Please don't be angry with me. I didn't mean you in particular. And anyway, it isn't what I say. The scientists have proved it. It's in my books. Women have smaller brain than men that's why they are called the weaker sex. (Soyinka 1963: 4)

In another instance, Soyinka gives a bad picture of women through his character (Lakunle), who degrades Sidi just because she detests a foreign culture, and considers such act as indecent:

Lakunle: Bush- girl you are, bush-girl you'll always be; uncivilised and primitive-bush-girl! I kissed you as all educated men- And Christians- kiss their wives. (Soyinka 1963: 9)

Again, Soyinka considers women as property that men can inherit. It is known that from both Christian and Islamic religions children and wives inherit the property of their father when he dies, but not the wives that the deceased person leaves behind. This is confirmed through Sadiku, who tries her best to convince Sidi to marry her husband Baroka (the Bale) so that Sidi would be the last wife. And when he dies she will be the first wife of

the new Bale who inherits the deceased Bale's property including all his wives:

Sadiku: Sidi, have you consider what a life of bliss awaits you? Do you know what it is to be the Bale's last wife? I'll tell you. When he dies- and that should not be long; even the lion has to die sometime- well, when he does, it means that you will have the honour of being the senior wife of the new Bale. And just think, until Baroka dies, you shall be his favourite. (Soyinka: 1963, 20)

Soyinka again degrades women through his character (Lakunle) who says women pictures in an indecent manner would be printed in newspapers in order to show the progress of their society:

Lakunle: We'll print newspapers everyday with pictures of seductive girls. The world will judge our progress by the girl that wins beauty contests. (Soyinka 1963: 37)

Finally, Soyinka relegates women as marriage march-makers. Not only marriage march-makers but wives whose husbands are tired of them and their only importance is to find other wives for them, as in the case of Sadiku a wife of the Bale who almost throughout the play keeps ups and downs in order to woo Sidi for him. She really plays a very tremendous role in getting Sidi for the Bale, for instance,

Sadiku: Well, will you be Baroka's own Jewel? Will you be his sweetest princess, soothing him on weary nights? What answer shall I give my lord? (Soyinka1963: 20).

Again Sadiku plays such role for Baroka, when she tries to invite Sidi to be a guest to the Bale if she cannot be his wife:

Sadiku:My lord says that if you would not be his wife, would you at least come to supper at his house tonight. There is a small feast in your

honour. He wishes to tell you how happy he is that the great capital city has done so much honour to a daughter of Ilujinle. You have brought great fame to your people (Soyinka 1963: 23).

Conclusion

In conclusion, women are really and badly relegated to such a degrading position in the great role in its development. They are also presented in a bad picture in many of the literary works, especially by male writers, such as Soyinka, Elechi Amadi, Ola Rotim, Chinua Achebe and others not mentioned here.

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