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AFRICAN FEMINISM AND ZULU SOFOLA'S PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE SWEET TRAP

BY

Canice Chukwuma Nwosu

Theatre Arts Department

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

+234(0)8037415046, nwosucoc@yahoo.com

And

Nicholas Akas Chielotam

Theatre Arts Department

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.

+234(0)7068993401, akasdancescholar@gmail.com

Abstract

The war of the sexes is as old as the human society, but to a large extent, this egocentric superiority conflict between the male and female folk appears to place men at advantage position that make them lords over women. Consequently, patriarchism has continued to motivate different forms of agitations among Western, Oriental and African women. However, from late nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century, the term feminism was used to describe these agitations as they dovetail into movements, organizations and ideological conceptions. Incidentally, as the wind of feminism continued to blow across the globe, it became fragmented and metamorphosed into various forms of feminism of which African feminism is one. At its inception, African feminism replicated the general feminist manifesto that strived towards de-womanizing women, hating men, lesbianism and all forms of pervasion. Events took a dramatic turn and repositioned the views of some African feminists who undertook the reappraisal of the feminist agenda in Africa. Womanism, Motherism and STIWANISM are outcomes of these feminist reforms in Africa. Zulu sofola appears to have captured this paradigm shift in her play *The Sweet Trap*. The researchers assess the impact of Sofola's paradigm shift on the entire liberation agenda as well as its influence over Nigerian feminist writers like Marbel I. Evwierhoma, Irene Salami Agunloye, Molara Ogundipe, Catherine Acholonu, Tracie Utoh and Ngozi Udengwu. Case

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study, content analysis and personal observation research methods were adopted for the realization of research objectives.

Introduction

"Chi kere ha nibuo, nibuo" is a popular Igbo adage whose interpretation reads" God created them in pairs:Man and woman, good and evil, the ugly and the beautiful, the young and the old, negative and positive and so on". It is a truism that this duality of nature is to a large extent captured by the creative enterprise during several eras in theatre history. For instance, Victor Hugo,a modern theatre theorist in his "Preface Cromwell" opines that;

> …nature does…mingle in its creations, but without confounding them, light and darkness, the sublime and the ridiculous, in order words, the body and the soul, the animal and the intellectual. (684).

Hence, nature in its completeness assigned roles to every being based on sex differentiations, making it incumbent on each group/kind to contribute its quota to the existential essence of the habited community. However, emergence of developed societies has compelled some groups to view their own role as the most vital in the organized society; hence, they see that of others as minor and secondary. This is without prejudice to the fact that each person's role no matter how minute remains indispensable in the effective welfare of the people. Thus, the concept of cosmic communal well-being does not subjugate but recognizes the requisite quota contributed by each group. There is no gain saying that nature placed the male folk at the apex of one half of this cosmic chain, consequently, man over years utilized his vantage position to create a patriarchist society and put in place one dimensional cultural statuesque that subjugates the female folk. The outcome is that the traditional society produced stereotype images of women that revolve around motherhood, house-help, weaker sex, bed mate, junior partner, assistant and a helping hand. Ngozi Udengwu affirms that in the traditional society:

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> The girl was a child to the husband, who was usually much older than her, sometimes more than ten or twenty years older, age wise. Therefore, women were minors, being children; they depended totally on their husbands intellectually, financially, emotionally and spiritually (15)

Though women liberation has been part of the African world, Western civilization and socio-economic changes impacted so much on the reasoning and thinking of the female folk in the modern society and raised issues of inequality and equality of the sexes. It is a truism that obnoxious practices against women are thinning down in modern society in recent years Mabel Evwierhoma nevertheless posits that:

> …despite the change impacted on her by modernization, the woman is still largely marginalized. Although her image may be salutary and dignified, roles ascribe to her centre around those of house-keeping and mothering. This has tended to give her male counterpart an advantage of leading in most, if not all of the social affairs, especially those that are public. (1)

Beyond the traditional society through the modern to the contemporary, agitation of the female folks have gathered sophistication, mutating and hardening into archetypal gender issues and movements in Occidental, Oriental and African regions. Cyprian Obadiegwu opines that, feminist discourses entered this inferiorization and superiorization"debate in an attempt to change supposed women domination and oppression in a "patriarchal" society. Indeed, it is through debate that feminist theory and practices have evolved to incorporate the discourse on the changing circumstances of women's socio-political and economic conditions" (84).

Despite the fragmentations and encroachment of feminism into different disciplines and geographical locations, its focal points are women liberation and empowerment. Regional dichotomy and disparity in socio-economic and political realities produced diversity of "feminisms" such as Western feminism, Indian feminism, Jewish feminism, French feminism and African feminism. Summarily, understanding of feminism portrays it as a global ideological conception that harnesses major principles that condition agitation for

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gender equality. Even though feminism remains an aspect of genderism, it does not encompass both feminine and masculine issues. Molara Ogundipe, quoting Maggie Humm says that:

> Gender is the stated roles that are ascribed to men and women based on what is perceived to be their sex in society, it is a culturally shaped group of attributes and behaviours given to the female or to the male (12)

Feminism is therefore subsumed in genderism since it tilts towards questioning issues of women subjugation and empowerment. Patriarchism, another branch of genderism upholds the traditional society's presentation of natural and conservative images of women rooted deeply in the culturally assigned complementary role of a female folk as a help mate to the head of the family– the man. Unfortunately, this view has been stereotyped over the years and elongated to produce negative and distorted perception of women during different eras in human history. It is this chauvinistic tendency that enables men (in several instances)to lord it over women in marriage and other institutions of most societies. Africa is not left out in this feminist whirlwind and appropriating the tenets of Western feminism, African women got entangled in the crossfire of liberationism and freedom that made feminism go hay wire in Africa.

Zulu Sofola was one of the foremost African female writers whose feminist crusade stand opposed to separatist, radical and revolutionary feminism produced by the whirlwind of feminism blowing across the globe because of their aspiration towards achieving same sex status with men, shunning marriage, etc. Therefore, the preoccupation in this research is to assess the impact of Sofola's juxtaposition of the conservative and the radical feminist ideological conceptions within the African feminist agenda. This paradox of liberalism and radicalism in *The Sweet Trap* provides a suitable case study for this paper as well as for exploring Sofola's impact on other Nigerian feminist writers.

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Ideological Polarizations and Paradigm Shift in African Feminist Agenda

Ideology is a multidisciplinary term which describes numerous life endeavours; it is variously applied to create Identity, harness philosophical groupings and movements in Arts and Sciences. According to Evwierhoma:

> The term ideology means different things to different people. It covers concept, beliefs, norms, values, ideas, etc., which men and women employ to explain actions and attitudes, which they carry out or exhibit. (28)

Though ideology has been part of the society, Raymond Williams traces the origin of the word ideology to Destutt de Tracy, who intended the term for the "Science of ideas." (66) Williams goes further to identify three types of ideologies:

> … the kind which could be regarded as "system of beliefs" predicated on class positions; or those illusory beliefs-false ideas which have direct contrast with reality or scientific knowledge: and general and universal process of generating meaning (56).

Therefore, feminism is the product of societal mores and ideological conceptions which the family as the basic social unit inculcates into boys and girls as they become responsible members of the society. The people's tradition as put in place by the family, kinship system and the community is respected and revered even when they appear oppressive or offensive against any group or members of the same society. Traditional societies call the practices against the female folk taboos or restrictions; fortunately or unfortunately, the male child has an edge over the female one as soon as they become members of the society. Thus, these taboos have been there since the beginning of the society. However, while their impact in the West is wound up with civilization; they unfortunately degenerate into instruments of oppression in Africa as we develop. Emmy Idegu affirms that Feminism;

> …started as movements from the West nevertheless, over the years, the experience and reactions thereof have become firm in most developing economies of the world. Because cultures differ such reactions (acceptable and non-acceptable) sometimes have colorations of the people's typical

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> experience, without however, undermining the basic and fundamental foundation principles of the movement (76-77).

History of feminism and its developmental trend is to some extent determined by these differentiations and periodizations; following the above proposition Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker say that:

> The first feminist wave was in the ninetieth and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s and the third extends from 1990s to the present (1).

African feminist theories emerged from this feminist movements that project both liberal and radical/separatist feminisms. Feminism has predominantly altered perspectives of gender issues in Africa. Despite ideological dichotomy, African feminism should according to Molara Ogundipe stem from the theory of liberal feminism which projects feminism as"… a body of social philosophy that advocates and actively seeks the liberation and humanization of women in society". (9). Hence, radical and separatist feminism which seeks to achieve same sex status with men are antipodal to African culture. Zulu Sofola attempts the concretization of the liberal feminist theory in her play. Initially, she uses the juxtaposition dramatic technique to place the liberal and radical feminist groups side by side. Sofola uses resolution of the conflict of her play to make a strong statement on African Feminism. Nevertheless, *The Sweet Trap* relies on the duality of Sofola's plot, her dramatic technique that juxtaposes opposites to explore both radical and liberal feminism.

Zulu Sofola and Africa's Feminist Paradigm Shift in *The Sweet Trap*

Nwazuluoha Sofola was born on June 22, 1935 in Umuezeachima in Delta State. Sofola was among the foremost African female writers who popularized feminist literature in Africa. She was the first daughter of a family of two wives and eighteen children. After completing her primary school at Agbor, she travelled to read music at the Catholic

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University of America Washington, but later settled and graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in English Language. She also got her M.A Degree from Virginia Union University, Richmond. She wrote a number of plays both published and unpublished. Her published plays include: *Wedlock of the gods* (1973), *King Emene* (1975), *The Sweet Trap* (1997), *Old Wines are Thirsty* (1981), *The Disturbed Peace of Christmas* (1968) and *The Wizard of the Law* (1975).

The Sweet Trap is among Sofola's contemporary plays that expose some domestic represses, cultural subjugation, maltreatment and alarming effects of gender superiority meltdown against women and the women's fight for total liberation. The play opens with the discussion of Okebadan festival by the male and female folks in scene one. The discussion affords the women the opportunity to castigate the one sided lampooning of women by Okebadan performers. The women show in the outbursts that characterize the discussion that they felt insulted and pushed to the wall by the male folk. Hence, their decision to resist this age long harassment and subjugation of their group by the opposite sex. The playwright uses Mrs. Clara Sotubo's Birthday celebration to elongate this decision and further propels the plot. We see the women empathize with Clara as a group when her husband Femi Sotubo vehemently refuses to approve or support her birthday party on the grounds that it was unnecessarily expensive and wasteful.

These predicaments of women are portrayed in the lines of both the liberal and radical women in the play. The likes of Mrs. Ajala and Clara, are not happy with how they are humiliated and how men devalue the sacredness of the female reproductive organs (the pride of every woman) all in the name of a festival called Okebadan. Their annoyance is that the Okebadan festival only derives joy in ridiculing womanhood while the men watch in

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excitement without plans to put to an endto such a primitive lampooning of women. These are seen in the lines of Mrs. Ajala and Clara:

Clara: it is amazing how the government is doing absolutely nothing about this primitive festival. (2)

Mrs. Ajala: How could it? The government is run exclusively by the male species, you know. The Okebadan festival is a ridicule of the female organs and could be more exciting to the men than a legalized opportunity to take a swipe at us women.(2)

The women see this festival as a direct attack on the female folk and an opportunity by the men to showcase their masculinity, dominance and superiority over women. Moreover, the men use this festival to show that they are always in charge while the women are to be restricted fully from all communal activities with the final aim of total submission of females. In this rhetoric question below Clara wonders why the attack should focus on women and says:

Clara: So it is our sex that this festival ridicules.

Mrs. Ajala: Obviously. Have you ever seen the participants ridiculing male sex organs? Mark you, the attack on the sexes in this rowdy festival was not originally restricted to the female sex only. It was only on recent years when our women began to resist male dominion and brutality that this festival degenerates into a rowdy display where men could take revenge for bruised egos.(2)

The women's anger stems from the view, that men have changed the concept of the festival and singled them out to be castigated and marginalized; especially with regards to participation in important communal festivals and taking family decisions on issues concerning them. In most cases they are not allowed to carry out personal decisions without permission from their husbands, whose answer finally determines the woman's fate. This can be seen in this dialogue between Dr. Sotubo and his wife Clara:

Clara: What party do you think it is?

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Dr. Sotubo: After I have objected to it in clear terms?

Clara: Yes, I am proceeding with the party in spite of your objections?

Dr. Sotubo: And my decisions as to what should happen in my own house carry no weight?

Clara: If the order is arrived at through a consensus of opinion by all parties concerned.

Dr.Sotubo: wonderful! Has it come to the point where every order I give in this house, every position I take in this place, every instruction I give here must be contemptuously thrown through the window?(9)

Dr. Sotubo reveals his chauvinistic attitude to his wife in the encounter above; this type of primitively behavior from some men demands that the women be followers of orders without contributing, altering or asking questions on the moral justifications of the orders given. Not even when the woman is educated enough to appraise situations and make an input. The patriarchists in the play believe that their wives academic qualifications make no difference. It does not make them special nor differentiate them from the illiterate market women. To the men their women must always obey their orders whether good or bad, favourable or not. Dr. Sotubo affirms this in the lines below:

Dr. Sotubo: Get it into your head once and for all that your university education does not raise you above the illiterate fish seller in the market. Your degree does not make the slightest difference. You are a woman and must be treated as a subordinate. Your wish, your desires and your choices are subject to my pleasure and mood. Anything I say is law and unattainable. When I say something it stays; whether you like it or not, clear? (10)

It is amazing that somebody of Sotubo's status does not recognize the importance of education in the development of the human especially women because he compares his

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educated wife with an illiterate fish seller in the market. Inadvertently, this callous statement spurs the women into action. Mrs. Ajala begins the sensitization campaign and says:

Mrs. Ajala: I was just telling Mrs. Oyegunle, she should not allow any man to pull the wool over her eyes. Men are necessary evils. You treat them with kindness and they take you for an idiot. You must always protect yourself against their barbarous bestiality or else you will be completely annihilated. (13)

Thus, the women decide to embark on a liberation and freedom fight for the realization of their rights. But to secure the elusive rights was not so easy because the male folk were all out in making such crusade unattainable by brutalizing and oppressing the women at home. Clara laments:

Clara: That beast has done the unbelievable! [*Tries again to hold back tears*]

Fatima: please, don't be upset

Mrs. Ajala: Did that brute lay his ugly hands on you? She queries her and Clara responds;

Clara: He broke a bottle of beer on my head and dared me to make ...[*breaks down in tears*] (14)

This unnecessary show of aggression through wife battering is unacceptable in a civilized world. Women are not to remain as mere observers without participating in the day to day running of their homes and in the nation's political process. Unfortunately Sofola shows that the likes of Dr. Sotubo are yet to accept cultural transformations ushered in by change. The male folk still see their women as dependents and vainglorious beings that

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derive joy in spending their husband's money on frivolous activities. This is witnessed in this discussion between Dr. Oyegunle and Dr. Sotubo:

Dr. Sotubo: your wife must be preparing for something.

Dr. Oyengule: Couldn't be. We are not anticipating any function

Dr. Sotubo: you know how women suddenly have a brain wave. Nothing pleases them as much as a money-burning function. (17)

Sofola in her usual catalytic plot construction style uses polarization dramatic technique to present three different views on these issues so as to heighten the conflict of the play. Thus, two types of women: those who are totally submissive obey all instructions and always see their husbands' decisions as final and those who claim to be equal with their husbands are presented to us. The first group does not counter or alter decisions taken by their husbands. Mrs. Jinadu who belongs to this group confronts a member of the second group (the radical feminist group) and opposes their decision to challenge their husbands. Mrs. Jinadu unequivocally condemns Mrs. Fatima's decision to buy expensive materials and party items without her husband's approval. Scolding Mrs. Fatima she says; "These party items and this fine expensive cloth tell enough of what is wrong. Husbands are usually very upset by the sight of such objects." (24) But Fatima flares up and says:

Fatima "… I will buy what I want and do what I want whether or not he has given his approval. (24)

Noticing that Fatima has taken a firm decision to oppose her husband, Mrs. Jinadu, adopts dialogue and persuasion in order to convince and win Fatima over to the side of the conservative women; she does this without mincing words, persisting with the argument that a woman's husband is her crown and cautions Fatima:

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Mrs. Jinadu: That is not a good attitude on your part.

Fatima tries to defend her position and says

Fatima: It is a good attitude. Simply because I am not a university graduate he thinks he can treat me anyhow. Which graduate wife will accept such nonsense from her husband?

The two women continue this war of words below with Jinadu becoming more passionate:

Mrs. Jinadu: It is not so. I am a university graduate myself, but my happiness is in what I can do to make my husband happy.

Fatima: Even if he says no to what you want very much?

Mrs. Jinadu: Yes if he says no and I see that he will be unhappy if I go against his will, I immediately abandon my plans.

Fatima: It is only idiots and those washed with *juju* that do that I am not a fool and I have prepared myself against anything from anybody.

Mrs. Jinadu: You have been moving in the wrong company.(24-25)

This ideological clash between the two women above shows that the second group does not see anything good in men. They resist, reject and oppose anything said by their husbands. Mrs. Clara another strong member of the radical group addressing her husband says:

You should have known that with my degree, I cannot be pushed around by the inflated ego of an un-disciplined male partner. I stand on equal grounds with you and cannot be forced into any action that is against good reasoning. (10)

Sofola adopts the same polarization in the characterization of the male characters; she groups them into patriachists and feminists. Dr. Sotubo who belongs to the misogamist group also encounters opposition from the feminist group who insist that the women must be treated like human beings in the society. Thus, the arrow-head of the feminist group, Dr. Jinadu persuades Dr. Sotubo to change his chauvinistic attitude to his wife. She addresses him by his first name and says;

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> Femi, women are human beings. They may be more prone to follow fads than we, but at the bottom of everywoman's heart is a sincere longing for a stale home where she can happily with her husband and children. (34-35)

Sofola uses theoretical exploration of these gender issues to create a gulf between the liberal and radical/separatist feminists. Hence between radical/separatist and liberal feminisms she places African feminist movements of womanism and STIWANISM. To further complicate the plot of the play Sofola bestows the burden of this "a little bit to right and a little bit to the left" transition to a middle course on Mr. and Mrs. Ajala and Mrs. Fatima Oyegunle. Mrs. Ajala in her initial separatist view says;

> Ajala: I was just telling Mrs. Oyegunleshe should not allow any man to pull the wool over eyes. Men are necessary evils. You treat them with kindness and they take you for an idiot. Give them an inch and they take a mile. [To Fatima] You must always protect yourself against barbarious bestiality or else you will be completely annihilated (13)

Consequently the clash of liberalism and radicalism becomes Sofola's locomotive engine for this enigmatic paradigm shift that brought enormous influence on African women writers and the African feminist agenda. The conflict makes Mrs. Ajala and Mrs. Fatimato become introspective and change their radical feminist stand. Though initially the duo of Mrs. Ajala and Fatima attempted to influence Mrs. Oyegunle against the male folk, through persuasion the liberalists are able to convince them and suddenly we see them transform to womanists who recognize their natural roles in the society and acknowledge that their husbands deserve respect. Mrs. Fatima brings this to us when she says:

Fatima:

> I was not going to allow her to insult my husband any longer. My mother had always taught me that a woman's husband is her crown and it is her duty to protect crown. A lot has happened to that crown since last night and I am not going to allow it to continue. I have told her goodbye forever and that is that.(62)

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Unlike the female folk, who are persuasive, some men use brute force such as wife battering, for instance to check any attempt to alter their decision as in the case of Dr. Sotubo who broke an empty beer bottle on his wife's head to keep her under control.

Conclusion

Contextual analysis of *TheSweet Trap* shows that the playwright portrays women as subjugated and maltreated because of gender inequality. However, Sofola suggests that in pursuit of equity and social justice, there should be a paradigm shift that will enable women to adopt pragmatic and diplomatic approaches especially in Africa, where equality of the sexes is antipodal to the people's culture. Incidentally, Sofola's paradigm shift is reinforced by Evwierhoma's theorization on feminism. The study also established that maltreatment of women can only be stopped when the men are enlightened to put aside their superiority complex and learn to recognize the important role of women in the development of the nation as a whole. The paper also states that the relationship between the sexes should be symbiotic in order to achieve peaceful co-existence.

The research also noted that even though the fight for equality with men was being championed in the play by the likes of Mrs. Ajala and Clara, their consequent transition shows that what women need is empowerment. This view is more compatible with the African worldview as evident in Sofola's paradigm shift. Hence, the separatists, through their transition and paradigmatic change of view become aware that what women need is empowerment based on proper education, exposure, good reasoning and thought; and not the craving for same sex status with men. The former will enable them to be heard, respected, appreciated and allowed to take important decisions on their own without necessarily relying and depending on their husbands or male counterparts.

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