

# Travelling Theory

## The Feminism and Womanism of Tess Onwueme

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### Abstract

Osonye Tess Onwueme is arguably the leading female Nigerian dramatist today within and outside the country. Since leaving Nigeria for the United States, she seems to have acquired a deeper orientation of the concept and theory of feminism, especially feminism as praxis. The totality of her plays since *A Hen too Soon* explains clearly the place of time, location (of culture), and the artistic growth that every good writer experiences. In discussing this topic, the paper shall look at three areas of Onwueme's artistic development and shifts. Out of her over twenty plays, only four shall be used as paradigms of these three crucial phases. The first phase shall deal with her early feminism (*The Broken Calabash* and *The Reign of Wazobia*); the second phase with womanism referred to here as her early African womanism (*Tell it to Women*) and the third is her later and purer African womanism (*Then She Said It*); all discussed within the framework of the playwright's artistic development vis-à-vis the influence of her sojourn in the United States. The paper shall also endeavour to reconcile these three phases within the framework of the feminist dilemma in Africa.

### Introduction: The Crisis of Feminist Theorising

As an offspring of the postmodernist enlightenment, the crisis of feminist theorising in Africa is deep-rooted in the elusive

search for functionality and definition in every cultural milieu and its attempt to 'destabilize' the founding assumptions of modern theory.<sup>1</sup> In its alternative presentation to Marxism, which is seen as the radical political discourse of modernity, feminism has become the radical political discourse of postmodernity, especially in its affirmation of the absence, the periphery, the Other – spaces in which the position of women is structurally and politically inscribed – which has been argued to be of more current political credibility, than Marxism. This double commitment to the deconstruction of structures of domination and to freedom, equality and justice for women has become the central concern of feminists as to whether this means an alliance with postmodernism or even the political project of the Enlightenment (Kipnis 204-11).

Nonetheless, feminism can no longer deny its postmodernist roots. Interestingly, however, in its contradictory search for justice and equality, feminism has developed a self-reflexive mode interrogating its legitimizing procedures in a manner which draws it close to a modernism that has observed the lessons of post-structuralism and intones at a most general level of a crisis of legitimization across culture, politics and aesthetics of practice. The slogan 'let us wage war against totality' may be postmodernism's response to the earlier feminist slogan 'the personal is political' (Waugh 189).

Although feminist theory and discourse has presented itself as an ever-growing and interesting field since Virginia Woolf and de Beauvoir, and even Millet, in its polysemy and self-reflexivity, the crux of theorizing has not transcended Alice Jardine's neologism 'gynesis', which seeks to discuss 'woman' as that process diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; 'indeed the valorisation of the feminine, woman, and her obligatory, i.e., historical connotation, as somehow intrusion to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing,

speaking' (25). Therefore, contrary to Natasha Walter's claim in *On the Move: Feminism for a New Generation* that new feminism aims to separate the personal from the political because women of this age do not want to have their personal life 'policed by feminism', feminists still insist that the personal is still political even within the variegated boundaries of cultural situatedness.<sup>2</sup> This is because as feminist critics variously adapt for their own uses the strategies of deconstructive or psychoanalytic or Marxist theory, the theoretical differentiations which define history (a factor which the universalist feminist theory repudiates) become bedecked with further political contexts over the idea of identity (Baldick 185).

Today, the universal feminist theory has unequivocally fallen prey of the same criticism of the grand schema of modern Western social, political and cultural theory in its embrace of postmodernist critical project. The theoretical space is consequently enlarged and in its 'tenebrous sense of survival', feminism like its co-travellers (postmodernism, postcolonialism) now finds itself entrapped in the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix 'post'; thus, we have postfeminism, locating it then within the scope of the culture of the 'beyond'. The realm of the beyond is neither a new horizon nor a leaving behind of the past but in the *fin de siecle*, it curiously and paradoxically places us in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figure of difference and identity, past and present, insider and outsider, inclusion and exclusion (Bhabha 1). Therefore, the acceptance of the jargon postfeminism or postfeminism does not translate into an acceptance of afterness to the beyond but the fact that it inhabits an 'intervening' space that seeks to transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment. Feminist theorizing in Africa consequently locates itself within this transitory space of the 'post', giving

birth to a yet polysemous feminism whose epistemic problematic is not only limited to Africa but a result of its Euro-American roots. But the fundamental problem confronting a totalised feminist theorising in Africa is the question of originality, definition and relevance (Akoh "Poetics" 137). Part of its contradictions is the fact that the search for global sisterhood is predicated largely on gender while ignoring issues of race, culture, class and sexuality.

The roots of the feminist movement and theory in Africa and all its nomenclatures of the post-feminist waves are traceable to the beginnings of black feminism and womanism which themselves are a direct offshoot of the contradictions in the Modern Feminist Movement (MFM) that reached a frenzy in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> This is responsible for my adoption, in the post-feminist mode, of African Womanism as a theory, which:

celebrates African womanhood. It valorises motherhood and mothering as a virtue and with a sense of power of the domain of woman. It is a philosophy which sees the woman as woman while recognizing her definite roles which, in themselves, cannot stand without those of the man's and vice-versa... is opposed to the negation of womanhood for the attainment of a new status or height (Akoh "Poetics" 140).

African womanism therefore can be said to be an offshoot of the communality of traditional African societies that insists on the complementarity of the sexes. African feminist writers have generally fluctuated between these spacious waves or spaces of feminist theorising. Unequivocally, African feminist theorists are still in search of their mother's garden (to twist Alice Walker's words to our advantage), and lost in the permissiveness of postmodernist theorising, many more

definitions and debates still await the twenty-first century feminist literature in Africa. It is in this permissive space that we find our present dramatist where she has 'matured' over time, ideo-aesthetically speaking.

### **Phase One – Radical Feminism of Onwueme**

*The Broken Calabash* is indubitably Tess Onwueme's arrival into the radical feminist fold. The play presents us with a clash of tradition and modernity. At the time of writing the play, Onwueme probably had in mind to lend a voice to the corpus of what was becoming the vogue in early literary tradition in African drama – the issue of clash of cultures or generations (Amuta 54). The centrepiece of the message is the urgent need for change in a traditional society that places high premium on tradition and customs as well as parental authority; all of which rule the possibility of the power of the individual especially the female to make a choice. Ona, the heroine, is trapped between tradition and modernity. As a university undergraduate, she wishes to marry the love of her life, Diaku, in a manner permitted by modern society life without interference. Her parents, hanging to tradition, pose a stumbling block because she is an *idegbe* – an only child. As an *idegbe* she is expected only to marry into the family and preserve the family seed. Besides, her heartthrob is an *osu*, a group of outcast; hence she is in a dilemma between her love for Diaku and the *right* tradition confers on her father (Courtuma), an opportunity the latter appropriates with a somewhat libidinal impulse. Chidi Amuta describes Courtuma's possessive relationship with his daughter as having "something of an incestuous streak about it with him thinking of and talking to his daughter in terms overloaded with Freudian overtones". Consequently, Courtuma frantically frustrates Ona's desires especially as he breaks the calabash of palm wine offered by

Diaku's family as part of the marriage ceremony.

The breaking of the calabash at a more symbolic level represents "Ona's shattered emotional aspiration and stability as well as the tradition which Courtuma strives so hard to protect and defend" (Amuta 56). On the other hand, it goes to reveal the shaky nature of the tradition which is awaiting a tragedy as Courtuma breaks a tradition in his attempt to save another. One of the resultant effects is that Diaku is forced to find an alternative girl who he eventually marries. The playwright is however not daunted at this level as she still equips Ona with the will power to bring down the strings that tie tradition together. It is not surprising then when she voices strongly:

Let the wind blow –  
Let shaky homestead be blown. Anything  
Which cannot stand the force of change must  
Be uprooted or be blown into oblivion by the  
Storm heralding the new season! (*TBC* 43).

Thus, she accuses her father of being responsible for her pregnancy. This turn of events forces the father to commit suicide, finally bringing about the defeat of tradition in the face of an inevitable socio-cultural change.

In *The Reign of Wazobia*, we are confronted with a total yet intriguingly subtle revolution that explains an exclusive feminist agenda. In the play, Wazobia's unwillingness to abdicate the throne after serving as regent for the stipulated three seasons provokes a battle of the sexes executed in typically facile feminist mode. This obstinacy attracts the wrath of the men, some of whom are her chiefs, as they garner efforts to unseat her. But she is not alone, for most of the women are with her. One of the chiefs and the chief priest of Ani are also on her side. The chief priest and his colleagues vested with the power of presentation of the traditional hot

calabash of herbs, which is a symbol of rejection and destruction of Wazobia, surprisingly return after consultation with the verdict that the latter is the choice of the gods whose wrath should not be provoked. This shocking revelation is compounded by the fact that even the Omu the 'king' of women who hitherto stuck to tradition and challenged Wazobia's guts, seems now poised to embrace the song of the new dawn, earlier echoed by Wazobia herself:

The face of the sun changes, so does the moon.  
Seasons too change  
So also the face of the clock  
The clock ticks... (*TRW* 22).

Undaunted, the men stage their protest but they are ambushed and overpowered by the women. Wazobia consequently consolidates and assumes full control of the reins of power.

The unity and success of the women here is incredibly overwhelming. The playwright does not only equip them with feminist revolutionary consciousness; she appropriates the voice of divinity to sermonize on both equality and women's capacity for all-round ascendancy. In this case, the voice of the gods, which had laid the traditional rules for kingship, has been twisted against the people in favour of 'imported values' and "many voices acquired from sojourns here and beyond the seas" (22, 27). This justifies the Western roots of the women-centred ideology fore-grounded in this play, and its utopianism is pushed further by the melodramatic inheritance of the wives of the former king by Wazobia, a woman. While on a general note, feminism is the apparent ideo-aesthetics of the play, its concrete ideo-aesthetics is total revolution, and the project of the revolution is, conceptually, a highly ambitious one which seeks to break through the walls of cultural

boundaries and attain an identity with global radical feminism. The end of the revolution is not only contradictory but exposes the obscenity and apocalypse of the so-called new dawn in typically postmodern turn.

From the two texts examined above, the recurrent motif is the feminist vision built in the tradition of Western culture, and their very execution exposes the chimeral and hypothetical nature of feminism within a culture that places high premium on the family system and its values. And, thus, operating from their husbands' houses, the women's concept of feminism at both local and international levels as portrayed in the plays,

Has a worm that squirms at its core and is maggot-ridden by its very human condition, because the dilemma of the feminist is the dilemma of the proverbial chichidodo which hates excreta with all its soul but thrives on the maggots that breed inside faeces (Nnolim 249).

### **Phase Two – The Theory of African Feminism**

Traces of what has come to form the fulcrum upon which the theory of African womanism is built could be seen as early as Sofola's *The Sweet Trap* published in 1977. The play is a unique expose of the realities that confront the African woman, which she must recognise in her search for identity, self-fulfilment and new heights within global feminism. The playwright's call in the play is a move away from the present 'confusion of roles' to the status quo where 'everyone knew his place and stayed there' (48) and yet there is an uninterrupted symbiosis. In this play the playwright seems to be saying that "African tradition with its spiritual centre is healthier than modern post-industrial society" (Fido 57). Here, again, we align with Fido that the playwright's commitment to tradition is not a blind turning to the past; rather it is a desire

to bring both men and women back to a state of willingness to accept old ways of mutual respect and responsibility. This is a supporting tissue of African Womanism for the twenty-first century. Thus at this stage of Onwueme's artistic development, her play *Tell it to Women* gives this theory a more contemporaneous attention; and it explains further the fact that specific perspectives of reality really determine the viewpoints to women oppressions.<sup>4</sup> Sofola herself, asserting the need to return to the basis, warns that if the women dare to insist on the provisions of culture and tradition for them the modern man would be destroyed because the latter does not have the vantage world of his fathers. One should equally believe that this caveat also goes for the modern (elite) woman who too is rifted from this privileged past of her mothers. Will modern women be ready to accept the past of their mothers with all the responsibilities, burdens and challenges it offers? These and many more are issues which African womanism interrogates. In a Sofolan tradition therefore, *Tell it to Women* begins Onwueme's shift from radical feminism to *African* womanism.

Subtitled 'an epic drama for women', the play dramatises the preparation for the launching of the Better Life for Rural Women programme initiated by a group of urban (elite) women who see themselves as 'torch-bearers of global sisterhood' (feminism). The primary aim is to:

break boundaries of confinement and compartmentalization of our potentiality in the oppressive, despotic and tyrannical hegemony of patriarchy imposed on women these many years (27).

Represented conspicuously by Daisy, Director of Women Affairs in government and Ruth, an unmarried feminist scholar

whose promotion to the rank of full professor of feminist studies is solely dependent on the success of the launching, the preparations begin to have cracks from the outset of Yemoja's sojourn with the elite women in the capital city. As the one meant to be the 'eye' of the rural women of Idu, Yemoja soon discovers that the plaque given to her in the village is only meant to lure her to the city to serve their (Daisy and Ruth) selfish purposes. This becomes clearer when Daisy maps out her boundaries of operation in the house. Both Daisy and Ruth treat Yemoja as a slave, making her realise the social hiatus between them.

Besides, the lesbian relationship between Daisy and Ruth, practised in the very home where Daisy's precocious daughter of ten years is growing up, also draws curious attention to the new concept of sisterhood and 'queendom' dominated only by 'sheroes' where marriage, 'an unforgivable insult' to women, is prohibited. Thus, mentored by Ruth, Daisy's marriage to Okei begins to crumble as they both now despise family life, a borrowed doctrine to which the playwright's persona, Adaku, appropriately responds:

That is our new disease: Oyibo! And now the family head must be turned upside down and men must hand over power to women. Wives must lie on top of their husbands for women to show power and live a better life? I do not... I cannot understand the whole message! I even hear that in Oyibo land now, men marry men and women marry women... (38).

Interestingly – and this is where the playwright's message really lies – the certificated women meet their Waterloo during the aborted launching where, to their chagrin, the rural women led by Adaku and Yemoja, and even joined by Daisy's precocious

daughter, openly denounce this 'new disease' in a grand celebrative dance of womanhood and motherhood.

In *Tell it*, an artistic shift of ideology can be seen in the playwright between *Wazobia* and now. Written after the space of a decade, the play appears to douse the purely facile feminist posture of *Wazobia*. It seeks a redefinition of this feminist ideology in Africa and debunks the popular opinion of the elite women that their education empowers them to speak for all women, and thus totalise theory. It views the African concept of power in a new and different light from the borrowed Western feminist vision that has come to form the fundamental ideological stronghold of the women elite.<sup>5</sup>

Besides race, the new feminism which African womanism negates is fashioned in the mode of *Animal Farm*: 'all women are equal, but some are more equal than others'. This is the obvious contradiction found in the class divide between the elite women and the rural 'uncertificated' women. African womanism, therefore, within the framework of postfeminism seeks to create a balance in this relationship (between western feminism and African womanism) by a caveat that the woman in her search for fulfilment does so only as a woman and not in the facile 'bumpy-chested' revolution. The message of the play thus becomes double-edged: one, 'the destiny of the hen is not the destiny of the cock'; two, 'beware of fellow women'.

### **Phase Three – African Womanism: Theory meets Practice**

Let me do a bit of rereading of my earlier position elsewhere where I had precariously taken *Tell it to Women* as the peak of the playwright's artistic maturation.<sup>6</sup> I shall therefore confess that like Onwueme (as it is with every good writer), I, also, have 'grown' since then as a critic. Thus, we shall say that while *Tell it ...* defines African womanism as a theory, in her recent play, *Then She Said It*, we are confronted with a more

ideologically mature Onwueme no longer at the level of definition but of full explication of African womanist ideology, of synergy. And interestingly, the voice that says it is that of a woman! In this play which foregrounds female characterization, the playwright expresses her concern for the sustenance of the family and the collaboration of the sexes to combat issues of oppression and bad leadership in Nigeria and the entire developing world. 'Hiding' under the umbrella of the feminist discourse, Onwueme exposes the ills of the local and international politics of oil exploration in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The concern for women nevertheless is obvious in that they turn to be the ultimate victims, losing husbands and children, suffering rape along with their daughters, among others, in the fictional nation of Hungeria. It is on the strength of these that the women become the voice of the oppressed seeking full compensation as is evident in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria.

Built on the factual story of the ordeal of the women in Odi and Choba in Rivers and Bayelsa States of Nigeria, the playwright interrogates the paradox of Nigeria as an oil producing nation and yet suffers from it. Metaphorically, the women's position represents the playwright's castigation of local collaborators in the enslavement of the nation to foreign powers. Atlantic, the foreign Director of the GRA Oil Club confesses: "... this bloody country without a leader? Don't you blame me. I take what I get. After all, your so-called leaders gave me the power" (53). The playwright's message then becomes clearer beyond a feminist revolt to a call to all in the fight against all forms of domination. This is why the elderly women reconcile with their educated young and rebellious daughters to discard the usual 'man-woman palaver' (60) to seek a better life for all oppressed men and women. This also is to deny any association with the often repeated stigma on feminist tag:

Oh, come on! Don't be fooled by that feminist nonsense. Jargons? (spits) Rabble rousers! Worst of women. Failed, frustrated women. All of them. Ugly. Old maids, watch. Watch them nowadays when women fail to find husbands, or fail in their marriages, they turn feminist. Even les...bians (spits). Abominable! With that they start spitting fire and hatred against men. And you know, they demonise what they lose, can't reach or get. That is what the so-called feminists do... (104).

This assessment undoubtedly is true of facile feminism. Careful of this stigma, therefore, the protesting women in this play express their need and indeed, right to fulfilled family life. It is this negation that makes the playwright's flight at international politics a possibility. Looked in this direction, the new focus in African womanism is a collective interrogation of the continued triumph of capitalism over communism, the affluent over the impoverished mass of African men and women, in addition to the need for a fulfilled family life for men and women. The centre of it all is the triple heritage of the pandemic: money, profit and power (MPP) controlled from, and by, the West with the aid of local collaborators. The characters in the play are all metaphors of this malaise on one hand and the struggle against it, on the other. In this last play, therefore, the playwright seems to be saying that feminist vision should not be focused mainly on the search for identity per se but should include the peculiar problems of poverty, ethnic crises and youth restiveness, etc., as it is prevalent in the playwright's region of her home country Nigeria. Africa, she intones, must focus on these teething problems with the spirit of communalism where the women must see themselves as

mothers championing the course of liberation for all oppressed peoples of Africa. This is the primary thesis of *Then She Said It* in its purer African womanist ideology.

### Conclusion

Like every pragmatic writer, Onwueme has demonstrated amenability to societal trends all through her artistic career. She indubitably remains the most ideologically engaged Nigerian female playwright to date.<sup>7</sup> It is obvious again that her initial approach to the subject of feminism while still resident in her home country Nigeria was practically an evidence of an experience of limits. Thus, beginning from *Tell It ...* written in her sojourn in the States, her plays begin to serve as epistles from abroad to her compatriots to be weary of positions espoused in earlier plays. Indeed, these last plays explain clearly the place of time, location (of culture), and the artistic growth that every good writer experiences.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See the essays in Michele Barret and Anne Phillips, *Destabilizing Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> For details on this argument, see "New Feminism Versus Old," <<http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/socialistwomen/sw5.html>>

<sup>3</sup> Megan Feifer and Jennifer Maher in their "The History of Black feminism and Womanism" attempt a satisfactory account of this emergence and the attempt at homogenising which excludes issues concerning the interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender.

<sup>4</sup> For detail, see Deborah King's "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness" which interrogates this issue within the context of black feminist thought.

<sup>5</sup> For a further explication on this see Ameh D. Akoh's "Towards

an African Womanist Poetics," and "Issues and contradictions in the Feminist Agenda in Nigeria," which x-ray these contradictions and develop an alternative theory.

<sup>6</sup> See Akoh, "Towards an African Womanist Poetics".

<sup>7</sup> This writer is not unaware of the credible works of upcoming feminist playwrights like Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, Irene Salami, Julie Okoh, etc.

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