

## **Staging Feminism: Strategies of Resistance Employed by Women in Barclays Ayakoroma and J.P. Clark's Plays**

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### **Abstract**

This essay is on “Staging Feminism: Strategies of Resistance Employed by Women in Ayakoroma and Clark's Plays” aims to expose and suggest solutions to gender relational conflicts in Africa. Drama has always served as entertainment and as a platform offering insightful aesthetics, revelations, prophecies and solutions to social problems. African dramatists craft plays to impart these values to their audience. One of the pressing problems plaguing African society and the world at large is the feminist struggle. For years, the sexes have been embroiled in a struggle for supremacy. Men often subjugate women, to assert their dominance and superior strength. To cope, women employ the politics of sex strikes and disobedience against masculine authorities. Seeking affirmation of their place in society and believing they will get social justice. However, grassroots sex politics and rebellion have dire consequences. To achieve the aim of this essay, a critical analysis of Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave* which portrays female dissent to subvert patriarchal authority semi-urban Nigerian village and Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* that demonstrates women's protest against economic inequality or marginalization is done. The essay employs the socialist theory and uses an interpretative approach to content analysis within the qualitative research methodology. It concludes that society should foster respect, love and communal harmony; where unity is broken, friction ensues, leading to disaster. Therefore, it recommends recognising equality among all individuals, as everyone is equal before God.

**Keywords:** African society, Grassroots, Politics, Rebellion, Sex.

## Introduction

Sex and political rebellion have long been pressing topics of discourse across various disciplines, including drama. Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* famously depicted the first notable rebellion of women against patriarchy. Women's rebellion arises from the belief that they are equal to men politically, sexually, intellectually and economically, highlighting the need to redress this disparity. Before advocacy efforts, women were regarded as subordinate to men, facing significant exclusions from education, property ownership and political representation. For instance, Plato in his *Republic* reflects the hegemonic dominance by saying "The woman is subject to the Man on account of the weakness of her nature both of the body and mind... man is the beginning of woman and her end just as God is the beginning and end of every creature" (218). The subjugation of women is compounded when religious interpretations reinforce harmful gender hierarchies, positioning women as inferior to men. Apostle Paul in the *Bible* states "Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husband at home, for it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (1 Corinthians 14: 34, 35). In *The Poetics*, Aristotle perpetuates patriarchal views, suggesting women's inferiority to men and advocating for their silence, effectively rendering them voiceless and mere possessions.

In most traditional African societies, women's freedom and authority are largely restricted except in child rearing and domestic duties assigned by their husbands. Women are expected to be subordinate to their husbands, prioritizing their pleasure. Traditionally, a good woman is expected to remain calm despite her husband's oppression. In seeking freedom and dignity, women spark political rebellion, as they ultimately determine the paternity of their children, a notion supported by Ayakoroma in *Dance on His Grave*. She mobilizes to dismantle longstanding hegemonic norms, and a powerful wind of change is blowing. According to Tess Onwueme, "When the wind of change blows, anything that cannot stand the force of change is uprooted or blown into oblivion by the storm heralding the new season" (63). This change dismantles patriarchal values that have long subjugated women. Women now participate in politics, seeking to be heard, lead, and challenge Africa's cultural norms through rigorous protests. The reason has been that "Politics everywhere is essentially about who gets what, when and how" (Auwal and Ahmed 378). Politics is principally influenced by who controls the affairs of the state.

Both sexes battle for supremacy on who is to control the affairs of the state. Many women believe that eradicating inequality and oppression will create more just, social and economic structures that will facilitate women's participation in national development and the international struggle for economic globalization and solidarity. As female participation in state affairs grow, conflicts in marriage and battles for gender supremacy become increasingly inevitable. This essay therefore explores the politics of sex and rebellion at the grassroots level, analyzing Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave* and Clark's *Wives Revolt* brilliantly highlighting numerous contrasting notions between men and women in the plays' culture. These contrasting beliefs presented by the playwrights

are some of the causes of the conflicts, which have resulted in feminist revolutions or movements for women's liberty and justice in patriarchal nations such as Nigeria. The plays depict the numerous types of injustices that women face in society. Unlike in the old past when women swallowed or took whatever the males gave out to them without question, the women of Toru-ama and Erhuwaren, who are wives and even mothers of the men of the communities, refuse to allow themselves to be overwhelmed or relegated any more by their husbands and sons. The women's resolve to collectively seek justice and equitable treatment from society appears to be sending obvious signals that the period of master-slave relationships between them and males is finished.

### **Review of Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave***

Barclays Ayakoroma combined both motherism and radical feminism as guiding theories to the plot of his play. Motherism propounded Catherine Acholonu believes that Men are dominant in socio-political spheres of life while women have the upper hand in spiritual and metaphysical segments. As economic power is the source of social influence in society any person wielding it can command a lot of respect; and this person is not restricted to any gender. Acholonu articulates the point,

Patriarchy, the system that places men on top of the social and political ladder seems to be an inappropriate term for describing the organization of the social systems of the African peoples. This is because several African societies reflect systems with ranging degrees of dual-sex hierarchies in which men and women exist in parallel and complementary positions and roles within the society. (233)

In contrast to motherism, radical feminism considers the male controlled hierarchy as the defining feature of women oppression. It seeks to challenge the arrangement by rejecting standard gender roles and male oppression. It reveals how male power is exercised and reinforced through such practices as sexual harassment, rape, housework etc. Radical feminism believes that women can free themselves only when they have done away with what they consider inherently dominating patriarchal system. No wonder Alaere pushed Olotu to committing suicide, a revolt against the social system in which men dominate. In *Dance on His Grave*, Ayakoroma presents the motif of sex and rebellion at the grassroots level through a tragic lens. Although the relationship between Olotu and Alaere has not been extensively developed, their conflict is pivotal. It is fueled by the women of Toru-Ama's protest for gender equality, spearheaded by Erebu. She sets the stage for Alaere to take over. The women's request for equality could have been negotiated amicably in a loving atmosphere. However, Alaere, the Queen, and Olotu, the King lack this cordiality. Instead, Alaere emerges as the primary catalyst for turmoil in Toru-Ama. She spearheads a challenge to her husband's authority, effectively staging a successful coup. This is because the King, unable to stand the stress of his wife's undermining his authority and the fatherhood of his daughter, commits suicide.

The women of Toru-Ama were not unreasonable in their demand for fair treatment by their male counterparts. They had the right to request consultation before any major decisions affecting Toru-Ama. In fact, in civilized societies, women's voices are valued through referendums that gauge public opinion on government policies. So, when Alaere says: "if you must know, we only want our rightful place in the affairs of the land (18)", she is not asking for too much. However, when she gives the ultimatum thus: "...If you want peace in this house you have to call off the proposed invasion of Angiama" (19). Alaere disregards the ruler's prerogative to declare war when necessary. Instead of confronting Olotu aggressively, Alaere could have persuaded him to reconsider invading Angiama through gentle and loving means. However, under the guise/pretext of prioritizing Toru-Ama's well-being, Alaere instigates a crisis that ultimately destroys her husband and her marriage. When she says: "... And we women are not going to sit back, fold our arms and see our sons die in the prime of their lives" (19).

She seems to be expressing concern for the preservation of the lives of the people of Toru-Ama. However, ironically she becomes guilty of provoking the death of the number one man of Toru-Ama when she declares: "We want to be recognized, and no more war in the land. If you refuse with those chiefs of yours, we will have our own war in this house" (19 -20). It is obvious from the position of Alaere that she has a personal vendetta against her husband which she masks with the women's protest. A queen is expected to be by the king through adversity and prosperity. It is unbecoming for a queen to incite revolt against her husband, yet Alaere does precisely that. The domestic war escalates. The men decide to subdue women through violence, achieving partial success as many succumb to their husbands' dominance. However, Alaere wields a powerful weapon against the king, ultimately securing a decisive victory. This triumph eclipses the men's successes, rendering them insignificant. Although the women are temporarily subjugated, Alaere the First Lady emerges victorious in her battle against her husband.

The three areas of contention between Alaere and Olotu include: "the place of women in the affairs of the land; calling for a truce with the people of Agiama; and finally the future of Beke". Because of these differences, which Alaere feels strongly about, she draws the battle line. However, only Beke's future has personal implications for Alaere. The other two concerns - women's empowerment and peace with Angiama - are crucial for Toru-Ama's welfare. Ideally, community-centric issues should not fuel domestic strife within the ruling family. Alaere may have been selfish in desiring to keep Beke in Toru-Ama. Perhaps because she is her only child, Alaere would not like to live without her. However, the author does not provide convincing reasons why Beke, the apparent heir to the throne of Toru-Ama, should study the white man's way of life abroad rather than stay at home and immerse herself in her people's culture. Furthermore, Alaere does not strongly object to Olotu's decision to send Beke away to study. However, the author fails to adapt his work properly to the local setting, remaining overly faithful to the source of inspiration. The argument between Olotu and Alaere regarding Beke's education and upbringing echoes Strindberg's *The Father* reportedly the inspiration for *Dance on His Grave* is based. Unlike *The Father*, set in Europe with a non-royal

protagonist, Olotu as King of Toru-Ama has compelling reasons to be proud of his culture and raise his Beke, the future queen, within it. The true source of conflict between Olotu and Alaere lies in their differing visions for Beke's future.

Alaere is determined to keep Beke at home, likely because she is her only child, and she cannot bear the thought of living without her. So, she takes her life into her own hands and challenges the paternity of Olotu over Beke. She directly confronts him with the suggestion that he is not Beke's biological father when she says:

Suppose I am ready to put up with anything. To lose my home and good name, for the sake of keeping my only child and bringing her up the way I want. Suppose I was telling the truth just now when I said Beke was my child, my own child and not yours. (33)

Olotu cannot hear this. He says: "stop it." But Alaere is not done with him. She frustrates him further by saying: "you see, I could just name the real father, with detail of the time and place for instance, when Beke was born" Olotu becomes infuriated. He shouts at her: "stop it I say, you devil." Alaere is happy; she has made him enraged using his own doctrine. Olotu has committed himself by observing previously: "you can't say who a child's father is" (25). Alaere mildly protests against this statement. But Olotu insists: "They say that is something you can never be sure of" (25). That in gist is what Alaere refers to as "Olotu doctrine". King Olotu is unable to accept the harsh implications of his doctrine to his situation. The familial conflicts in the families ends, yet Olotu finds no relief. Alaere's insinuation that he is not Beke's biological father grips him firmly. Despite Alaere's assurances that Beke is indeed his daughter, lingering doubts persist, as evident in the following excerpt:

Olotu:           Now woman, since we have ended this foolish war, I you to free me of every suspicion. Tell me the truth; is Beke really my daughter? (*There is no response from Alaere*). Answer me, is Beke truly my daughter?

Alaere:           What do you expect me to say?

Olotu:           The truth.

Alaere:           Will you believe me?

Olotu:           I will still myself to believe you.

Alaere:           I have told you the truth. She is your daughter.

Olotu:           NO! That is difficult to believe.

Alaere: You see! You have made up your mind that she is truly, not your daughter.

Olotu: But you raised my suspicion and now that I think of it, I believe that you must be right. Yes, I remember now... the circumstances around your pregnancy were mysterious. And after Beke, you have not given me another child.

Alaere: I have told you that she is your daughter. You take it or leave it (59).

For King Olotu, it is not so easy a matter to take it or leave it. Since Alaere knows that the punishment for adultery is death, yet suggests that she is unfaithful, she really must be. Olotu returns to his doctrine when he observes: ... I am not sure she is my daughter since no one can tell the true father of a child. As a woman, you bore her in your womb for nine moons, gave birth to her and took care of her. Your being her mother cannot be contested (59). But Alaere insists: "I have told you times without number that you are Beke's father" (59). To Olotu's enquiry "Then why did you raise my doubts?" Alaere answers: "We were fighting a war. In a war, everyone goes with one aim: to win. It could be by fair or foul means" (60). However, Olotu remains unconvinced. In his view, Alaere's accusations are akin to the reckless utterances of a drunkard, lacking the courage to speak truth when sober. Thus, the issue remains unresolved. King Olotu might have tolerated the lingering suspicion about Beke's paternity for the rest of his life. Nonetheless, Alaere's latest tactic pushes him to the brink, prompting his tragic decision. Seeking revenge against, Olotu, who remains unconvinced that Beke is his child, Alaere devises a plan to declare mad and unfit rule, paving the way for Beke to become Toru-Ama's queen. The prospect devastates Olotu, exposing Alaere's cunning intentions. When Olotu attempts' bid to confront Alaere, he faces opposition from Beke who rejects him as her father. Beke upbraids Olotu for beating her mother and emphatically asserts Alaere is her mother, denying, Olotu's paternity. In a dramatic exchange, Beke thrice declares Olotu is not her father as shown in this excerpt:

Beke: Yes, father is wicked.

Olotu: Wrong child. Your mother is wicked.

Beke: Mother is not wicked. You are only jealous!

Olotu: Jealous?

Beke: That she is my mother.

Olotu: Now behave like a good child or I will flog that evil spirit out of you!

Beke: I hate you. You are not my father!

Olotu: What?

Apodi: *Barigu!*

Olotu: I am not your father?

Beke: If you can treat mother like this, then you are not my father.

Olotu: If I am not your father, who then is your father? Are you confirming that your mother has not been faithful?

Beke: Say what you like. But never you treat my mother like that again, you hear me? She is my mother but you are not my father. You are not my father! (62)

With the truth revealed, Olotu's illusions are shattered. Convinced that Beke knows her true paternity, courtesy of Alaere's manipulation, he accepts his hard fate that awaits the childless in Toru-Ama. He knows like the proverbial slave who sees another slave buried in a shallow grave and realizes that would be his plight at death. Unable to bear the shame, he chooses to end his life prematurely, succumbing to Alaere's evils machinations. In a tragic twist, he suffers the fate that many would argue Alaere deserved. According to Toru-Ama's laws, if Beke is not Olotu's child, Alaere's adultery would warrant death. However, Olotu's despair stems from his perceived childlessness. His tragedy unfolds amidst the women's revolt in Toru-Ama, which subsequently leads to his demise. While the women's actions contribute to the king's death, the primary responsibility lies with Alaere, whose cunning and manipulative nature precipitates her family's downfall. The domestic conflict driving the sex war in this play is exemplified by Alaere's defiant and obstinate behaviour, underscoring her role as the catalyst for chaos.

### **Review of Clark's *The Wives' Revolt***

In *The Wives' Revolt*, Clark examines the theme of sexism and feminism, exposing the prevalence of these issues at both societal and grassroots levels. Clark plotted his story adopting the feminist theory womanism [considered African feminism]. According to Ogunyemi womanism is:

Womanism is black centered; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand. (65)

To Ogunyemi, womanism is the rallying-point of the women of African ancestry in their struggle to effectively assert their humanity in the face of the malevolent attitude of the men folk towards their self-fulfillment in life. However, it does not emasculate the self-pride of men; rather it lures them into accepting to live harmoniously with them by abandoning their self-perception as superior partners in the collective struggle of the race for a better society. Knowing the theory of womanism, Clark set *The Wives' Revolt* in Erhuwarem, an Urhobo-speaking community in Southern Nigeria. The play is a comedic satire that challenges traditional gender dynamics in Nigerian society. Through poetic innuendo, Clark critiques the authority structures of both men and women. In the drama, the Erhuwarem women staged a walkout on their husbands as a way of protesting against the men's greedy mishandling of compensation funds from an oil company. In Erhuwarem, the community's oil company compensation is divided unevenly: men claim two-thirds, leaving the women with just one-third to share. Dissatisfied, the women protest this inequitable distribution. In retaliation, the men enact an obnoxious law banning goats from the community, effectively silencing the women's dissent. This excerpt below reflects the voiceless nature of the women:

Okoro:        what is all this, woman? You made your point a hundred times today, when the council of elders resolved into general assembly.

Koko:        oh, yes, so we did. But did your most respected president recognise our individual rights to speak?

Okoro:        well, you had your say.

Koko:        And you had your way (9).

The play decries the societal subjugation of women, forced to live at the mercy of men. The play dramatizes two pressing issues faced by African women. They are: the issue of even distribution of wealth and the question of traditional authority. The African woman is subject to her husband, but her duties in her home should not be confined to the kitchen and child bearing. Okoro believes that a woman's power lies only in the kitchen and on the bed:



- Okoro: Oh, so you are going to starve us, are you? Are you going to fight us with food? Is that new coup you people are plotting? Go on and carry it out...
- Koko: Nobody is going to fight you with food. That will be giving you further licence to stay out.
- Okoro: But what other thing can you do? Ban us from yourbeds? That won't work either, for we will only invite the women on the road into town by popular demand (12).

To the men, the women can do nothing apart from being in the kitchen and the other room (bed-room) also, she has no right. This Okoro affirms, "Women have no rights – no special rights that I know of; they bestow their gifts on whom they like, run their households as they please, bring up our children the way they deem fit, and crown it all, they dispute rights with our mothers in their one ambition to change us" (21). Clark reveals that the place of women in African society is very special. She should be respected. There are things she does that the man cannot do:

- Idama: there are so many things women do that we cannot do.
- Okoro: Tell me one of them. There, you can't tell right away. You have to stop to think. What does a woman do that you cannot do and do better?
- Idama: It's the women who bear the children.
- Okoro: That's a gift of God, man. Anyway, who wants to carry that kind of load for nine months? (22-23)

Using *The Wives' Revolt*, Clark reveals that there are things men cannot do for themselves; therefore, women should be held given a place in the African society. However, women believe that to get recognition and respect from the men there is a need for rebellion. Though she is subject to the man, Koko attests that she is subject to her husband, "... my husband who owns me" (17). However, men show respect, lest women resort to rebellion. The women of Erhuwarem love respect and are willing to obey their husbands, but denying them the respect and right they deserve is a profound insult.

The third point of contention arises from control over the domestic economy. In this society, women rear goats while the men keep pigs, providing each with an

independent source of income. Men freely sell their pigs at the Ughelli market without interference from their wives. However, when men feel disrespected, they retaliate by restarting women's access to their livelihood, specifically banning goats. According to Koko, "you people really should have done better than pick upon the goat. But, no, all you want to do is get on top us women" (9). The Banishment of goats on the pretense that they destroy the farm-lands, filthy and that goats are a conducive haven for witches is only a ploy to get at the women. The women question the hypocrisy, asking if the men's swine do not destroy farm-lands? The men listen to testimonies of drunks and pass judgement against women without proper investigation and facts. This excerpt explains:

Koko:            (*clapping hands in his face*) leave off, man!  
Leave the poor creatures alone and deal  
with us women if you really believe you  
have witches for wives.

Okoro:           What, would you have us banish you  
women rather than the goats?

Koko:            who will be surprised if you did, since  
you now confuse domestic differences  
between couples with civic matters, and  
personal problems with affairs of the  
state?

Okoro:           I tell you it is a matter of public concern  
and safety, and these men you abuse so  
roundly were courageous and  
responsible to bring it to the assembly  
before any harm was done to innocent  
citizens.

Koko:            There was no danger posed anywhere to  
anybody, certainly not by harmless  
goats, who know nothing but munch,  
mate and sleep where night catches  
them.

Okoro:           Responsible men have seen with their  
own eyes that these harmless creatures of  
yours can cause havoc, although you  
may not see the damage physically and  
immediately.

Koko: Responsible men! Now, if you are looking for a creature in this town that causes havoc physically and immediately, you people should have done better than pick upon the goat... there you have your pigs prowling all over the place unmolested, but because you hold the swine in common trust and sell it at inflated prices to Ughelli people at times of their festival, while goats are cheap, household animals kept by us women, you protect one animal and expel the other out of town (8-9).

Therefore, the women engage in the strategy of refusing to give sex to their husbands and rebellion to protect themselves and affirm that women have a place at Erhuwarem. They cannot beat the men but protests the unfair treatment they get from the men by abandoning their homes and domestic duties. By doing so, they demonstrate their essential value to the community, forcing men to recognize and appreciate their contributions.

### **Points of Intersection between Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave* and Clark's *The Wives' Revolt***

The plays, *Dance on His Grave* and Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* accurately show the pitiful predicament that women face in patriarchal nations such as Nigeria. In a practical way, the playwrights present important and critical questions about how society treats women, as well as women's reactions to a dominant patriarchy. *Dance on his Grave* adopts a radical approach to resolving issues. That is Barclays Ayakoroma adopts radical feminism in structuring his play whereas, *The Wives Revolt* which adopts womanism as an approach in dramatization is subtle in handling gender conflict.

In *Dance on His Grave*, the fundamental source of contention for the women's revolution is the desire to have a say in administrative affairs. The men out-rightly refuse. This is owing to the fact that women's voices have long been suppressed in Nigeria, which is predominantly patriarchal. As a result, the women decide to demonstrate that, despite being regarded inferior by men, they possess tactical brilliance. If their voice is not heard in social communal issues, they can control the condition of events at home by determining who the true father of a child is. Whereas in *The Wives' Revolt*, the playwright convincingly exposes the exploitation, marginalisation, oppression, and other forms of injustice that women face in patriarchal society.

In other words, the plays investigate the numerous ways in which Nigerian society treats women unfairly, as well as how the injustices that women face serves as catalysts for their revolts in order to enthrone change and demand fair treatment from society. From the start of the plays, the audience is forced to see the master-servant interaction

between men and women. When important communal affairs or matters are brought for discussion in order for choices to be made, women are not taken into account, and their perspectives are clearly not solicited. The women, who appear to have bottled up many previous episodes of mistreatment from male members, resolve to embark on a sex and political insurrection. The goal is to alter the socially sanctioned system that has allowed men to bully women whenever possible.

### **Conclusion**

The study finds out that the politics of sex and rebellion at the grassroots level stem from the contention for dominance and affirmation of authority between the sexes. In Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave*, Alaere uses Beke's paternity to challenge the patriarchal hegemony over women. Conversely, Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* depicts, women walking out on the men to assert their importance and recognition in societal affairs. Both plays demonstrate that sex and rebellion serve as potent yet destructive tools for women to counter male dominance. This study, concludes that society is a place where respect and love should be shown. When someone or a people believe they are superior and need not show respect, friction and disaster ensue. In *Dance on His Grave* King Olotu dies, leaving Alaere widowed and sorrowful woman, whereas in *The Wives' Revolt*, women contract diseases and the men achieved nothing without them. Consequently, this essay recommends that there should be fair representation and greater inclusion of marginalized voices in social administration. Society will improve if both sexes listen to and consider each other's opinion. Furthermore, no one should consider themselves superior to others, as everyone is equal in God's eyes.

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