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**WOMEN, PROTEST AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN JULIE OKOH'S  
*EDEWEDE***

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**Abstract**

The 21st century African society is rife with oppressive and retrogressive customs and values that oppress and subjugate women. As a result, African women writers have embraced literary forms and subjects that highlight these issues and advocate for their elimination from society. Among these writers is Julie Okoh, a playwright, who projects her concerns about the dangers of female circumcision in her play, *Edewede*. Using feminism as a theoretical framework, this article interrogates Okoh's adoption of the principles of two opposing feminist perspectives—African and radical feminism—with a view to revealing their impact in rousing her female characters from subservience, ignorance and passivity, to revolt against their oppression through social protest. It is discovered that education, consciousness-raising, sisterhood, female solidarity and resilience are powerful tools for women's empowerment in the play. It is recommended that women should not be context bound in their choice and expression of feminist perspectives, strategies or weapons in the fight against gender inequality, oppression and exploitation; they should be open to contemporary avenues and progressive choices that will pave the way to their emancipation and social change.

**Introduction**

Social protest in the African society has always been regarded as the right of men. This is because as observed by Guida West and Rhoda Lois Blumberg, the general perception of politics and social protest is that it is "... an almost exclusively male domain" (3). In Africa, this notion is reinforced by a hierarchical social structure which creates a power imbalance by empowering men while relegating women to the position of the weaker sex; subordinates, who are voiceless and passive. The result is gender inequality sustained by traditional and socio-cultural norms, values and role expectations which have, over the ages, restricted women to the fringes of society where they are rendered practically invisible.

However, it is pertinent to note that despite their limitations, African women like women in other parts of the world, have through the ages, "acted on their felt concerns whenever and

however they were able” (West and Blumberg 4). To substantiate this, Flora Nwapa uses the example of the powerful role of Igbo women as *Umuada* whom she identifies as “all daughters born in a clan, married or not, and wherever they may be...” (527) in various social activities in their communities among them burial rites, title-taking ceremonies, peace-making, priestesses, members of age-grades etc. (527). Nwapa gives further insight into the significance of the *Umuada* by revealing thus:

Every member of *Umuada* knows where she belongs and what is expected of her. Members possess individual and group power but rarely act individually. No burial or title-taking ceremony is complete without the presence of *Umuada*, and woe betide any daughter who fails to show up in these ceremonies (527).

Elechi Amadi also highlights this significant role played by women in his novel, *Estrangement* (1986) by presenting a similar group known as the *Omirinya*, comprising “all women born in Kenke, married or not and wherever they may be” (89) who performed similar functions as the *Umuada* in matters pertaining to the welfare of women: “The women of the village were not inhibited in matters like this. They spoke out, not caring who was annoyed, so long as they thought they were right” (89).

Although the traditional roles played by African women are regarded as being “crucial for the survival and progress of the race” (Nwapa 527), they limit and marginalize women from the mainstream of socio-political affairs. However, the ability of women to successfully organize themselves and take charge of their personal and collective affairs. A good example is the Women’s War in Nigeria in 1929 during which women battled against the government policy which sought to place taxes on their income, generated through trade, as well as on their livestock. This led to a protest which spread to many parts of Nigeria despite efforts to subdue it. Margery Perham attests to the strength and resilience of the women when she notes that it was clear some of the participants were prepared to die for the cause (qtd. in Romero 181).

The courage and resilience of the participants of the Women’s War is evident in contemporary African women in both rural and urban areas who, through consciousness raising, are actively involved in movements engaged in activism from the grassroots to national level and, through social protests, are creating opportunities for the individual and collective growth of women, as well as for the enforcement of human rights and development in their communities, nations and the African society as a whole.

One of the significant tools for consciousness raising is literature. Through literature, writers use their literary works as a platform to entertain, convey and disseminate information, and to educate. The creative writer and his work therefore have a vital role to play in social change. Nicholas Conley makes the following observation about the writer’s role in society:

[The writer’s role] ... goes beyond the simple entertainment value of a good story. It also goes beyond the symbiotic relationship that’s experienced between a writer and his/her reader... writers write because they have something to say to the world. They have a lesson to teach, a lesson so important to them—whether it be moral, intellectual, idealistic, or cynical—that they’ve scripted an entire story for the sheer purpose of teaching that lesson. (“The Writer’s Role”)

Conley concludes by asserting that the creative writer uses his or her art to “... craft [a] statement about the world, and to reach the minds of others ...” through his or her voice and message (“The Writers Role”).

One of the avenues through which the voice and message of the writer can effectively reach his or her audience is drama and the theatre. Drama provides a forum for dialogue, the exploration of ideas and current debates on subjects and issues that affect the everyday lives of people in society. This interaction has the potential of creating avenues through which solutions can be found and change effected. One of such issues is female circumcision (also known as female genital mutilation), which is the main subject of Julie Okoh's play titled *Edewede*. First performed on August 25, 1998 in the University of Port Harcourt Arts Theatre to wide acclaim and published in 2006, it is a play which clearly reveals Okoh's "... consciousness of the necessity of art to be imbued with, shaped and guided by determinate social forces our contemporary experience" (Obafemi 65).

An experienced Nigerian playwright and a feminist, Okoh has a firm understanding of the significant functions of the theatre one of which, according to Jeffrey Sweet, is to educate by "[making]" vivid ... arguments and controversies which would look less vital summarized in historical, philosophical, sociological or anthropological texts" (qtd. in Horton "The Playwright") and, thus, uses her craft and the theatre as platforms to fight for gender equality. In *Edewede*, she highlights, through her feminist perspective, the dangers of female circumcision, the factors responsible for its continuity despite its adverse effects on women and the urgent need for its total eradication.

Female circumcision is, indeed, a controversial subject in the African society which has split society into two—those for and those against the practice. It is a ritual facilitated and encouraged by tradition and culture and practised in most African countries on girls and young women mostly between infancy and adolescence as a rite of passage into womanhood and adulthood. The World Health Organization defines female circumcision as the "... partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons" by a traditional circumciser ("Female Genital Mutilation"). A common form of female circumcision practiced in Nigeria is clitoridectomy which is the partial or total removal of part of the clitoris which Okoh highlights in her play, symbolically describing the process as the removal of "the peanut from the pod."

The World Health Organization lists the following as some of the after effects of female circumcision: "severe bleeding and problems urinating, and later cysts, infections, as well as complications in childbirth and increased risk of newborn deaths" ("Female genital Mutilation"). The main purpose of this rite in the African society, which is to supposedly preserve modesty, ensure chastity and curb promiscuity is in no way worth the risks and dangers to the lives of girls and women. It is for this reason that writers such as Julie Okoh, who concerned about women's welfare, upliftment and progress, are determined to bring changes to society by advocating the eradication of such harmful practices and the forces that promote them. In Okoh's play, the following assertion by Ogwude (2012) finds substance:

Art and commitment in terms of social responsibility and the evaluation of African writers especially, is polemic. Like the salt from two separate salt jars that mixed up in another become inseparable, so too artistic production merge and become one. Art no matter how lofty or plain will in the final analysis be empty and even perverse if it were to exist of itself alone (assuming such is possible) not addressing topical issues whether these be private and existential or public and socio-political (105).

It is for this reason that Okoh uses her craft to address the female circumcision which, in this instance, symbolizes African women's oppression through debilitating traditional norms,

values and practices and in so doing, her goal is to “re-envision African womanhood and re-position the African woman from the fringes of the societal schema” (Uko 86).

### Methodology

Using the qualitative approach, this article interrogates Okoh’s portrayal of female circumcision and the dangers associated with it in her play, *Edewede*, and the consequent revolt of her female characters against the debilitating traditional practice with the objective of revealing the underlying role of patriarchy and gender inequality in this practice, why and how the women revolt against the traditional practice that has, hitherto, been an integral part of their lives, the strategy and tools adopted by the women to successfully fight the practice, the significance of Okoh’s choice of drama and the theatre to propagate her message and the implications for social change.

### Theoretical Framework

Okoh’s use of drama to propagate her message highlights the significance of the drama and feminist theatre in feminist consciousness raising. The feminist theatre is an avenue through which feminist playwrights highlight women’s role expectations and their struggles in the socio-economic and political spheres of society. The African society comprises a patriarchal social order with structures that subordinate and marginalize women. The feminist theatre, therefore, provides a platform for feminist writers to expose these structures and their adverse effects on women with a view to eliminating them.

Holly L. Derr gives further insight into the significance of the feminist theatre by asserting that it “... provides an alternative not just to the male gaze but also to the normative gaze by intervening in cultural assumptions about identity, dismantling binaries, and creating equality (“Feminist Theatre”); this is evident in Okoh’s play. Bearing this in mind, feminism, whose key objective is to end all forms of women’s oppression, has been adopted as the theoretical framework of this study, with particular emphasis on African and radical feminism.

Helen Chukwuma describes African feminism as not elitist, but embraces the modern, educated woman, as well as the illiterate, rustic traditional woman. She further explains:

... African feminism is dictated and informed from within, from African social realities that obtain ... it is accommodationist not exclusive and negativistic. Men remain a vital part of women’s lives ... African feminism is progressive in its full commitment to developing women intellectually, educationally, economically, while still retaining the nucleus of the home. (*Feminism in African Literature* xiv, xvi, xiii).

African feminism, therefore, seeks a complementary relationship between men and women. However, it also advocates an elimination of those structures and norms that subjugate women. Radical feminists, on the other hand, are militant in their approach. For them, patriarchy—the pervasive oppression and exploitation of women by men—is so deeply entrenched in the consciousness of men that it will be difficult to eliminate. Radical feminists believe that men’s power and authority is derived from the dominant social status accorded them by patriarchy which sustains gender inequality. For this reason, patriarchy and its structures that suppress women must be dismantled which can be attained through an overthrow of the social order or culture change. (Lewis “Radical Feminism”). Two powerful tools utilized by radical feminists is consciousness-raising groups to create awareness about women’s oppression, and the organization of public protests to fight for women’s rights.

Despite the differences in the tenets of African and radical feminism and the perception that radical feminism has no place in Africa, Okoh chooses to incorporate ideas and ideals of both theories in *Edewede* to rouse her female characters from inaction to action. The wisdom of this choice becomes evident when through the adoption of radical measures, the female characters achieve their goal no longer objects, but as subjects who have earned the respect of their men.

### Literature Review

Since its publication in 2006, Okoh's *Edewede* has been the subject of much scholarly attention. In her article on African women's writings, Iniobong I. Uko identifies in Okoh's play what she refers to as "the revolutionary impulse and leadership skills" (88) which motivate the female characters to success. She also lays emphasis on the new awareness among them "to choose, their determination to move from the margins and inaction to the centre ..." (88) in order to debunk the arguments that justify female circumcision and insist the practice be stopped. Evidently, these traits exhibited by the female characters are reflections of the new direction of African women's writing.

In their analysis of *Edewede*, Oby H. Okolocha and Sophia I. Akhujemokhan emphasize the violations of women's human rights and identify issues which hinder them from fully realizing their potentials, among them abuse, forced marriage, the preference for male children, and female circumcision and conclude that women are often denied their social rights in the African society. The play, for them, effectively redresses the cultural and social rights of the female characters (285). This illustrates that drama and the theatre can be effective avenues for positive changes in the lives of women and, subsequently, for social transformation.

Nkechi A. Bature-Uzor, also explores women's roles in Okoh's plays with particular attention to the subversive role played by the older women in the play as agents of patriarchy in her article. She notes that the older generation of women, regarded as custodians of tradition and culture, spearhead the cultural practices that subjugate women in their bid for relevance in the community (33). This is an apt observation of Ebikere who, ironically, is the protagonist's mother-in-law in *Edewede*. Ebikere, contrary to all feminist principles, participates in the suppression of women in her efforts to protect and reinforce the patriarchal ideology through female circumcision.

On his part, Edward Egbo imo interrogates Okoh's feminist stance and commitment in her works and notes that her female characters are elevated to the detriment of the male characters as portrayed in *Edewede*. He enjoins feminist writers to strike a balance between the male and female characters in their works as there is need for moderation and sincere reflection of the happenings in society (70). Friday Nwafor, however, focuses on the form of Okoh's play: her choice of drama as a mode of expressing her concerns about women's subjugation through cultural practices such as circumcision. He identifies the physical, psychological and social effects on the victims and recommends understanding and cooperation between the sexes, as well as conscious effort on their part as a means of eradicating such practices (91).

From the foregoing, it is evident that critics have tackled various aspects of Okoh's *Edewede* including her dramaturgy; feminist stance; her techniques, including male and female characterization; gender roles, as well as the themes of the play which highlight various forms patriarchal oppression and exploitation of the female characters.

However, no effort has been made on the part of these scholars and critics to identify and critically examine a significant aspect of the play—the feminist ideologies adopted by the playwright, their impact on the female characters and the choices they make and how this reflects on their individual and collective goals. Herein lies the relevance of this article as it

fills this gap in its analyses of the various aspects of women's journey from the shackles of patriarchal bondage to freedom, fulfilment and social change.

### **Sisterhood and Consciousness Raising**

Okoh's *Edewede* is a play which highlights the socio-cultural norms, values and practices which dictate the lifestyle and roles played by women in the community. Being a patriarchal rural community, the women are socialized and guided by traditional laws and customs which subjugate and keep them passive and subservient. Among these practices is female circumcision, whose adverse effects on the daughters and mothers of Otoedo are vividly presented by Okoh from the social, psychological and medical perspectives.

The play opens with the protagonist, Edewede's mother-in-law, Ebikere, anticipating her granddaughter's imminent initiation ceremony during which she will undergo circumcision rites. On the other hand, Oseme, her granddaughter is apprehensive about the rites which are supposed to mark her transition to womanhood because of the fear and trauma of the death of her older sister, Ize, in a previous ceremony. For this reason, she seeks her grandmother's protection rather than her insistence that she participates in the ceremony by emphasizing its significance in the lives of women:

Circumcision is part of our culture. My mother was circumcised. So also were her grandmothers, great grandmothers and great, great grandmothers. It is a rite that every woman in this land goes through ... [as] part of the initiation rituals ... your bravery in the camp of circumcision will be the pride of your family. (2-3).

Through Ebikere, we are acquainted with the fact that the circumcision rite involves the "carving out" of each participants' clitoris which, according to tradition, is "... the source of confusion, impurity and imperfection" (5) in the girls. Getting rid of it, therefore helps to fortify and prepare them for their future roles as wives and mothers.

Edewede, the protagonist is very much aware of the dangers of female circumcision, for she has already lost one daughter to it. For her, the ritual is "a destroyer". Thus, while her mother-in-law promotes the virtues of female circumcision, regarding it as "... a thing of joy, prestige and cultural identity" (6), Edewede vehemently opposes the idea of subjecting her only surviving daughter to the rite a stance which attracts her mother-in-laws ire and warning: "you cannot throw sand on our traditions like that. I warn you. She who gathers a bundle of troubles, carries it on her head" (7).

Evidently, Ebikere and women of her age group are custodians of tradition and culture and, as such, staunch advocates of patriarchal values which they believe sustain their society. She is, therefore, a strong advocate of female circumcision despite the devastating consequences that many families, hers inclusive, have experienced. She therefore regards Edewede's assertiveness as a challenge and begins to plan her exit from her son's life and home, citing her inability to bear more children as an excuse. But Edewede refuses to be cowed into submission although she is very much aware of what tradition requires of her as a woman, wife and mother, having played these roles to the best of her ability in the past for fear of being found wanting.

Like every other woman, she had been conditioned from childhood to accept her position as the weaker sex, regard the home as her domain and live under the authority of her husband as his appendage, her personal identity subsumed under his. She, like every other woman in Odoeto, had accepted her place, silence and passivity. For Chukwuma, this social conditioning of women "is the greatest barrier toward a fulfilment of self..." (ix-x) and this proves to be true

of Edewede. It takes the death of Edewede's first daughter and her encounter and friendship with Eriala, an educated and trained midwife popularly known as Mama-Nurse who ran a maternity home in the village to change her perception.

Edewede forms a sisterhood with Eriala which becomes a positive avenue for her enlightenment, a development which prompts her to refer to her as her "light" and "oracle" (9). Through Eriala's education, Edewede becomes aware that she and the women of Otoedo are but slaves to tradition, mere objects, stripped of their humanity, conditioned to wallow in fear and to please their men even to their detriment. To overcome this situation, Edewede realizes that she must rise above her fear and break the shackles of silence and passivity. By so doing, she gains self-confidence, boldness and the ability to speak out against the menace of female circumcision. She reveals:

One day, I realized that I was merely an object, used by others ... I have killed that fear implanted in me from childhood. Now, I take my destiny in my hands. I speak on issues that concern me. And I follow my own advice. Nobody, I repeat, nobody can intimidate me again (7).

Now aware that many of the superstitions and also pronouncements of the village oracle especially on the health issues and the deaths of children in the village are founded on ignorance, Edewede is empowered by the knowledge she has acquired to counter the pronouncements and actions of the oracle, accusing it of placing the blame of the death of so many children who could have been saved through medical treatment on "human maliciousness" (10). She also comes to know that an uncircumcised woman is not incomplete and incapable of fulfilling her duties as a wife and mother as the women have been conditioned to believe. She is, thus, determined to correct these misconceptions and stereotypes propagated by the older women by finding an avenue to share her new-found knowledge with the women Otoedo and help them develop new and progressive perceptions, ideals and values that will enhance the quality of their lives and that of their families and the community. For this reason, she refuses to cave in to her mother-in-laws demands and boldly informs her husband Ordia of her decision: "Listen, I am tired of your mother wanting to draw us back to the past. She lives her life according to the needs of her generation. Let her leave us to live according to the demands of our time" (13). This implies that circumcision is not only outdated but has lost its value and must be done away with immediately to save the lives of innocent female children and women. Significantly, she also realizes that it is women themselves who must rise up and act to save the day for they—wives and mothers—suffer greater pain for the loss of their daughters than men do. To be successful in this endeavour, the women, like Edewede, must overcome their fears, avoid procrastination and fight bravely to eliminate all the obstacles that stand between them and their total freedom and progress.

Edewede initiates her plans for the transformation of Otoedo by bringing together the women of with the help of Ebon, a beneficiary of Eriala's medical expertise, and now a happy mother after years of infertility, and Eriala. Edewede eagerly passes down the knowledge she has acquired from Eriala on the dangers associated with female circumcision to Ebon who instantly recognizes the need for other young mothers and women to be enlightened as well. Acknowledging that ignorance is a disease and determined to prevent her only daughter from becoming a victim, Ebon quickly comes up with an awareness-raising strategy:

... We do it step by step. First of all, we talk to the young mothers one by one. Then we move on to discuss it in our weekly meetings. Finally, we launch a public campaign ... when they know about the dangers of circumcision, they

too will support our action. Without knowledge, self-determination simply cannot exist (30).

During this planning stage, some of the barriers that must be overcome to win over the women are revealed in the conversation between Edewede and Ebum on how to retrieve the women from the clutches of the traditional beliefs and customs that have been a part of their lives for so long are revealed. Ebum's question, "But how do you educate a people that see every new idea as a threat to tradition?" (30) is an acknowledgement that weaning the women from the old ways will not be an easy task but will be worth a try. They both agree that the older women may be the custodians of tradition, but the role the younger generation are equally important because they provide for all social events in the village which contributes to its growth and survival. Also, as procreators who birth the children of the land and ensure its continuity, women are entitled to the right to express their opinions and on issues such as circumcision which affect them directly and to take a stand against it if they so desire.

Edewede and Ebum are able to come to the above conclusion only because they are now conscious of their individual and collective rights as women and, having freed themselves from fear, are now ready to educate the other women on the need for a change which will involve "... discarding retrogressive and oppressive norms and practices against women ... [and] a need... to take their rightful places in society beside and alongside their men, not behind them groaning in silence (Chukwuma xvi). This knowledge empowers Edewede and Ebum and motivates them into action and, subsequently, freedom.

### **Women's Solidarity and Social Protest**

Having taken the decision to educate the younger women of the village, Edewede, Ebum and Eriala first summon a meeting of all the market women the purpose of which Edewede explains thus:

I bring you nothing but words.  
 Words to help you know yourselves better  
 So as to be able to choose for yourselves  
 Between light and darkness.  
 If by so doing I've offended any one  
 Let that person raise her hand  
 For to her, I do owe an apology ...  
 Recently, I have been accused of many things:  
 Of disturbing the peace in this village,  
 Of talking about things that are better buried in silence.  
 But I ask, "Is there any woman here, right now,  
 Who has not passed through sleepless night,  
 Watching over a dying child or relation,  
 Victim of the dreaded evil blade? (34)

Right from the very beginning, Edewede ensures that the women are made aware that the meeting is for their good. She paints a vivid picture of the fact circumcision, which she symbolically refers to as "the evil blade" affects each and every one of them directly, physically, psychologically and emotionally as women, mothers and relations. In the following words, she further reveals the role ignorance and social conditioning has played in their subjugation and the truth about their status as women in a patriarchal society in the following words:

Our mothers practiced circumcision  
 Because they knew nothing about anything

Except for laws and taboos imposed on them  
 To stop them from thinking for themselves  
 So that from childhood, they learn  
 To be shy, silent and docile  
 Until they see themselves  
 As objects for men's pleasure.  
 They got so accustomed to this condition  
 That they see any deviation from it as a crime. (35)

Edewede words help the women to see the total picture of how their traditions—laws, customs, taboos, role expectations—have imposed on them a second class status and rendered them subservient and docile. Having awakened them to this truth, she exhorts them thus:

EDEWEDE: But today, light has chased away darkness  
 And women must change with time.  
 Wake up! Wake up fellow women  
 Gird up your loins.  
 Rise up! Rise up fellow women  
 From your impotence to dazzling height.  
 Step up boldly! Step up proudly!  
 Proclaim your right!  
 If one never risks anything  
 One can never gain anything. (35)

In line with the tenets of feminism, Edewede which advocate that barriers that stand between women and their fulfilment and progress must be eliminated, Edewede reminds the women that “What is good is worth keeping. What is bad is worth throwing away” (35).

At the end of Edewede's speech, the women agree that they have the right to speak out on the subject of female circumcision and this paves the way for Eriala to educate them on the dangers and the implications for fatality:

ERIALA: My speech will be brief.  
 You all already know what circumcision is.  
 You have all gone through it.  
 In this society, many young girls have lost  
 Their lives because of circumcision.  
 Many women are suffering from different  
 Types of diseases because of circumcision:  
 Tetanus, urinary infections, V.V.F.  
 HIV/AIDS are all dangerous  
 Afflictions contacted through circumcision.  
 Yet they see nothing wrong with it! (36)

She further enlightens the women:

ERIALA: First of all, you must know that  
 God created man and woman in his own image.  
 If the image of god is one  
 Then man and woman were created equals.  
 But society made one master and the other slave.  
 Circumcision is a form of slavery  
 Imposed on woman to dominate her (37).

She also emphasizes the fact that ignorance and gender inequality are the main factors responsible for their acceptance of this the slavery imposed on them. She ensures that she dispels the stereotypes about the clitoris:

ERIALA: I am aware that the custodians  
Of our customs and traditions claim that  
Your peanut is the source of confusion and impurity.  
So, they carve it out of its pod  
To prevent you from having impure thoughts.  
But women! For once in your life, stop and think. (37)

The women are, thus, guided to arrive at the conclusion that circumcision does not prevent promiscuity which prompts one of them to ask:

THIRD MARKET WOMAN: If circumcision does not prevent promiscuity, why then do they make us go through it? (37)

Eriala seizes the opportunity to explain to them about the real function of the clitoris and how cutting it off does not only prevent a woman from enjoying sex but also makes her “a mere vessel for man’s pleasure” (38). At the end of her explanation, the women come to the realization that the fight to end female circumcision is a fight against their oppression, for their rights as humans and women and for their identity as individuals.

Judith Lorber reveals that radical feminists are of the view that “the presence of significant numbers of women can alter values and behavior” (131); this is demonstrated when, with one voice, they unite in solidarity and resolve to fight for their rights by fighting for the abolishment of female circumcision, realizing they must “... fight to win or remain slaves forever” (44). Edewede’s public humiliation and rejection by her husband and mother-in-law for her leadership role in the women’s cause only strengthens their resolve, validating the following observation by Bell Hooks:

The sisterhood that is necessary for the making of a feminist revolution can be achieved only when all women disengage themselves from the hostility, jealousy, and competition with one another that has kept us vulnerable, weak, and unable to envision new realities. That sisterhood cannot be forged by the mere saying of words ... the process begins with actions, with the individual woman’s refusal to accept any set of myths, stereotypes, and false assumptions that deny the shared commonness of her human experience (157).

Their next action is to adopt a strategy and Ebum is quick to suggest a powerful weapon:

EBUN: Women, we have a weapon!  
A very powerful one for that matter!  
It brings the kings from their high throne,  
Down on their knees before their slave ... (44)

This powerful weapon is their bodies: they resolve to deny their husbands any form of sexual gratification until they accept their demands and to do this without any form of distraction, they take a collective decision to separate themselves from their families. The women strip off their top cloths, pile them into a heap, form a circle around it and take a solidarity oath, an action which symbolizes their total commitment to the cause. They exile themselves to Eriala’s maternity home leaving behind their children and husbands. This radical action on their part clearly exemplifies women’s understanding of the potency of their collective power. As noted by West and Blumberg, “...women who construct their own meanings and traditions threaten

patriarchal values; they cease to be invisible and unreal, as they challenge the [systems] that men have created” (p. 8).

In a society where the man is regarded as the “owner” of the woman and, subsequently, her body, denying them access to, and using their bodies as formidable bargaining tools is a radical action which allows the women to reclaim and assert their rights over their own bodies. To counter this move, the men threaten them with banishment, and when this does not work, resort to pleading but the women stand firm for seven weeks. Fully aware of the significance of the force of their collective power, they assert:

We are women. We love being women, wives and mothers. But each woman wants to be herself, think for herself, and express herself in her own way as a unique being. Circumcision takes these rights from us, makes us objects. Today, we reject that status. We can no longer live by simply following the ideas handed over to us. So, ban circumcision, or... forget about us (p.59).

The assertion above reveals their awareness of their new identity and, as Charles Nnolim points out, the determination “... not only to assert her separate personhood, but to also break away from encircling shackles imposed by men and tradition...” (260).

During their absence, the men begin undergo a change in attitude and an important indication of this is when they begin to realize and acknowledge the significant place of the women and the roles they play in their lives, families and the community. They also come to the realization that laws, customs and values “... are not eternal, but constantly changing” (61) and that change must come despite resistance. They vote to ban female circumcision and welcome the women back with festivities. This decision on their part demonstrates their understanding and new-found respect for the women. Iniobong I. Uko remarks on the significance of the radical strategy adopted by the women:

This unprecedented female strategy of demonstrating rebellion against debilitating traditional practices against women achieves two immediate results. First, it engenders female solidarity; and second, it forces the men to critically reassess women’s desire to expunge female circumcision from the society’s value system (89).

Clearly, sisterhood, solidarity, courage, assertiveness, resilience and, above all, the women’s empowerment through education and consciousness raising realization, is what earns them their victory. By rejecting female circumcision, they reject inequality, subordination and objectification. This action is in line with both African and radical feminist’s recognition of the need to eliminate all forms of harmful patriarchal structures and values that oppress women, especially group oppression. By arming the women with radical strategies and weapons in their cause, Okoh depicts the gravity of the women’s situation in Otoedoland and the urgent need to redress it. As the saying goes, “extreme situations require extreme measures”. The significant because radical feminism is regarded as being incompatible with the African context as regards women’s lives, experiences and struggles.

### Conclusion

Julie Okoh recognizes the fact that the success of feminism depends largely on the ability of women to “... assume responsibility for drawing women together in political solidarity ... [and for] eliminating all the forces that divide women [and taking positive action as more] obstacles are created if [they] simply engage in endless debate ...” (Hooks 157, 158). This is the message Okoh shares through the story of Edewede, presented on the platform of feminist drama and

theatre, to advocate for the transformation of society through the eradication of those traditional structures, values, laws, and customs that cage, suppress and stifle the growth of women.

Indeed, there are contradictions and differences in the varieties of feminism just as there are in the lives and experiences of women in different parts of the world. As a result, feminist ideologies are therefore, context bound and informed by the realities that obtain in that context. African feminism is therefore bound to the African society while radical feminism is supposedly western oriented. By using both ideologies as the backdrop of her play and imbuing her traditional female characters with militant qualities and strategies to enable them win their battle, Okoh illustrates the fact that feminists, no matter their perspective, are fighting for the same cause which is the progress of women and, therefore, need not constrain or limit themselves in their choice of strategies or weapons.

Desperate situations often require desperate measures and, by arming her female characters through education and consciousness-raising, and choosing an extreme form of social protest as a strategy, Okoh advocates the need to cross boundaries where necessary by looking at contemporary avenues of choice for women in the quest for equality, social change and the total integration of women as partners in progress in the African society.

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