

International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies
(LALIGENS), Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 8 (1), Serial No 17, February, 2019: 118-126
ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v8i1.11>

**Mounting the Voice of the African Woman on the Continental Stage:
Interrogating J.P. Clark's *The Wives Revolt* and Ben Binebai's
*Karena's Cross***

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Abstract

In Africa, patriarchal dominance across cultures has placed women at disadvantaged positions. Women are seen as the voiceless gender, forced to occupy the silent margins, and in most cases declared invisible by laws and traditions promoted by men. This has resulted in a quest for recognition of the female voice. This quest for women's voice and identity is a front burner subject in Gender Studies across generic boundaries but researchers have not focused on some of the postulations adduced in the feminist plays and theatre. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the installation of the African woman's voice and rights on the continent through drama and theatre. Appropriating both textual and performance investigative modes, this paper x-rays J. P. Clark's *The Wives Revolt* and Ben Binebai's Mono drama, *Karena's Cross* to mount the voice of the African woman on the public space. The paper concludes that for women to enshrine their voice in the public space and have their humanity recognized and respected, more effort should be put in the quest to break away from their disadvantaged conditions.

Key Words: mounting, voice, African woman, gender, identity

Introduction

The African woman has over the ages been subdued by male dominance in virtually all aspects of her life. There is no easy space for the voice of the African woman either as a young and single girl or as a married woman in traditional African societies. This is due to the fact that her views and opinions on what is best for her, her family and her society is subject to male control. She is the downtrodden half of *society who also* suffers exclusion from patriarchal economic and political development strategies and Policies. Oby H. Okolocha and Sophia I. Akhuemokhan hold that:

Women's human rights are perpetually compromised and violated by the laws and cultures of human societies, making it exigent for women to cry out against socio-cultural practices militating against them (198).

The oppression of women both in traditional and metropolitan geographic settings and in contemporary times is a constant phenomenon. Patriarchal or macho ideas of violence and subordination of the female gender is still pervasive in Africa. This has given rise to the quest for female voice and restoration of the female dignity on the continent.

It is in connection with the desire to give legitimacy to the female liberation struggle that Article 1 of The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) of 1948, proclaims:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood (32).

This United Nations Declaration of Human Rights is designed to put a permanent stop to Gender discrimination, particularly female gender discrimination. Gender discrimination is a form of discrimination in which the sexes are treated unequally, a discrimination which is about how people are treated contrarily because of their gender. This position has increased women agitation and advocacy for a fair and level playing field for all. Apart from women's human rights groups, playwrights in Africa have slowly but steadily joined the crusade against women oppression. Okolocha and Akhuemokhan point out that:

In Nigeria, literary depictions of these injustices and trauma perpetrated on women abound, so we find depictions of the resistance of women to these practices. For the Nigerian female dramatist, these issues are personal because they have experienced it, seen it or heard of it. More often than not, it is a combination of experiences, hence their plays cry out against unacceptable violations of human rights as these issues pertain to women and seek reform of repugnant practices in society. The lives of these playwrights have also been conditioned by the same situations they depict (189).

Feminist Drama and Theatre

In Nigeria drama has transcended mere entertainment and is presently playing a critical role in speaking to and for the plight of the downtrodden masses. The interest of both male and female playwrights as well as critics and other Theatre Practitioners in Gender Issues has increased tremendously and this increased interest has given that area of study more attention which has consequently sustained the feminist drama and theatre tradition in Africa. Both male and female playwrights have probed into women related issues, critiquing and contending on the streamlining of laws, cultural practices and socio-economic partiality that deny or violate the rights of women. Many feminist plays have captured women's struggle against oppression and marginalisation.

In the light of the above, this paper examines J.P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* and Ben Binebai's *Karena's Cross*. The Play-texts are the works of two Nigerian dramatists whose works span the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, specifically from 1970 to 2015. These select Play-texts reflect the current trends of the female African theatre, their consciousness about women and the inclination to mount the female voice on the African stage. J. P. Clark one of the playwrights is an established Playwright and a pioneer African literary icon while the other, Ben Binebai is an emergent new generation Nigerian Playwright. Both Playwrights are from the Niger Delta Region and have contributed substantially to Niger Delta, Nigerian and African dramaturgy.

Feminist Consciousness in J. P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*

The Wives' Revolt is one of the early Nigerian Plays that recognized the female voice in African Theatre. *The Wives' Revolt* is a dramatic presentation of male dominance. The Play presents crude-oil spill compensation money as the thematic concern that breeds conflict between the sexes. The men and women of Erhuwaren community find themselves at loggerheads with each other over the sharing formula of the compensation money. "The men in all grades received two parts of the oil money" while the "women of all grades received only one part". This, to the women is a clear-cut case of oppression and suppression.

The women see it as a discriminatory distribution of social rights based on sexual lines. J. P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* is a dramatization of resistance by the women of Erhuwaren community against perceived injustice and denial of their fundamental human (equal) rights by the men-folk of the community. Clark puts before the world's stage the marginalisation of women and espouses the need for female empowerment and gender equality.

Clark is obviously concerned with the problems of African women and the portrayal of these problems within the context of the African society and humanity as a whole. In the Play, he addresses issues related to gender subordination and the need for a balancing within the continental space. He plants and presents his vision of women's humanity and the declaration of the human essence.

The overriding harmony in Clark's drama under investigation is that he did not hesitate to portray issues that trample upon the rights and privileges of women. As a male dramatist with

feminist concerns, he challenges male dominance and gives voice to African women in the play. Okoro, the Community-Town Crier and symbol of patriarchal dominance is thick-skinned and oblivious of the insensitivity of the new law that had been enacted by the men in their Council Meeting against women of the Community. Pompously, he relays to his wife:

We have passed into law a perfect legitimate wish of the people after due debate during which you had every opportunity to express your opinion. That law comes into force as the cock crows in the new day, and any attempt by any group to break, or resist it, however aggrieved they may feel, will be met by the full might of the people acting with one fist (10).

In the struggle for material justification and fulfillment, African women are demanding for economic and political rights and liberties first as human beings and then as citizens of the societies they belong to. The African women's opposition to obnoxious policies of the men can be likened to Koko's passionate declaration to Okoro, as she confronts him categorically with: "The law you have passed is bad, unfair and discriminatory, being directed against women because of our stand. We will not accept it" (10).

There is no doubt that women's struggle for social justice in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole, influences playwrights regardless of their sex, to dramatize feminist issues. In Nigeria, we can draw examples of women's political activism from the Aba and Egba women's Riot in the then eastern and western Regions of Nigeria. This action was carried out in opposition to intolerably obnoxious tax laws foisted on them. In recent history, African women's protests are assuming new dimensions in prominence. Apart from women identity struggles, women have also become part of the agitation for equity.

The position of Koko who represents the African women establishes a quest for justice and the proclamation of women's mutual right and collective affirmation. Thus, the voicing of their discontent in opposition to a biased classification and the need to effect positive change of the status of African women become a driving force in the women's struggle. At the resolution of the conflict between the men and women in the dramatic universe of *The Wives' Revolt*, Okoro a staunch defender of the Erhuwaren patriarchy proclaims after resolving the conflict with the women of the community:

Erhuwaren! Erhuwaren! Listen carefully, all you! Open your ears wide so that you may hear well. The town has been brought together; all quarters, sections and shades of opinion, as from this moment, are reconciled and reunited with one voice... Right now, let nobody pour petrol on a fire that is already dying down in all household ... It is enough to say that husbands will continue to share with their wives whatever fortune comes their way (56).

The play makes a case for the founding of positive self-image, and respect for the womenfolk and the institutionalisation of women's voice in Africa. *The Wives' Revolt* is therefore a dramatic creation that initiates and negotiates a voicing space for women on the African stage. This Play under investigation sustains the dramatic and theatrical spirit of performativity which

enhances the appreciation and staging of African women on the question of gender balancing. In this drama performativity is seen as a key component in the context of theatre as culture in action, or of performance as a cultural practice.

Feminist Consciousness in Ben Binebai's *Karena's Cross*

Karena, a teenage girl of thirteen was born and bred in a community called Owei-ama fictionally situated in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. The cultural setting of the community is one in which the voices of the men completely override those of the women. In Owei-Ama, the women are totally subsumed under the authority of their men-folk. Karena, young as she was, was forced by her father, Nemughan into marriage with a man old enough to be her father. With that marriage, she would have been automatically denied her fundamental human right to education of any sort. Little Karena was brave enough not to accept her preconceived fate as she struggled to recreate her destiny.

In her journey through life, Karena passed through several excruciating and harrowing experiences. Firstly, at the tender age of thirteen she is forced into marriage to her father's friend, a man as old as her very own father. To escape that traumatizing horror, she runs away from home to pursue freedom and a chance at education. In that process, she is abducted, raped and forced to marry the gang leader. In abject frustration and dejection; she is further deceived by sister-in-Law to engage in prostitution. Unable to live with that thought, she once again absconds from another matrimonial home as she continues on her quest for a better life for herself.

Eventually, fate smiles on her when she encounters Dr Daniels, a young decent liberal minded man who marries her, sponsors her education to become a lawyer and gave her the toga of a "properly married" woman. Karena accompanies her husband on one his official Sensitization Campaigns on negative effects of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). The campaign took them to Owei-Ama her ancestral home and co-incidentally, to the very clinic where she was treated for post-circumcision complications as a child.

Karena's transformation from a timid oppressed village young girl to a bold well educated happily married woman puzzled the citizenry of Owei-ama, especially her father (Nemughan) who at this time has become the paramount ruler of the community. On seeing the transformation in his daughter who had stood her grounds and rejected his barbaric treatment of her, Nemughan declared: "there shall be no more disempowerment and marginalisation of any girl child again" and members of the community concurred with the proclamation.

Karena's Cross like JP Clarks *The Wives' Revolt* dramatises the subjugation of the African woman, particularly the girl child in her struggle for visibility and prominence. The Playwright, Ben Binebai submits that the Play's social allusion is set from an obligation to represent life truthfully, to dramatises the social questions of the day such as the subjugation of women in public and private life, as well as their inclination toward resistance and the struggle for self-actualisation.

Karena's Cross, though a dramatic creation in itself, it gives impetus to feminist Writers and other Scholars to seek real authentication to the lives of women with the reader and audience as bystanders. It is significant to note that the intention, form and content of the Play lends credence to the issues of mounting the female voice on the continental stage (Interview with the Author, Dr. Binebai).

In this solo dramatic piece, the playwright studies traditional cultures, created, perfected and managed by the patriarchy and dramatically brings to the fore a series of cultural inhibitions and practices that negates the humanity and speaking chance of not only the African woman but of women globally. The universality of this play is attested to by Nishat Awan a scholar of applied architecture when asserts that:

The central theme of *Karena's Cross* is one that would resonate with women all over the world – the myriad ways in which public displays of authority intersect with private desires onto the intimate topology of a woman's body. As the author himself states his aim in writing the play is to give agency to oppressed women, whilst at the same time promoting the genre of solo performance in African theatre (iv)

Closely connected to the submission of Nishat Awan, Mabel Evwierhoma an outstanding feminist scholar who, while debriefing or construing the Play-text notes that:

Karena Cross is a monodrama drenched in many themes about women of all ages, classes and other social categories. It also has references to the different forms of domination women face in the society, or specifically, the burden the girl child faces in underdeveloped nations. As a text, *Karena's Cross* is heavily eco-centred, gender-based with sundry ideological intersections between text and context. The deep monodrama focuses on concerns that are not confined to the Niger Delta Region; but any community in which there is injustice and inequitable treatment meted out to its girl child or female folk. In *Karena's* environment, resources be they human, material, or spiritual, are exploited to the benefit of the male folk. There too, the few privileged males enjoy these resources to the cost of the many, subjugated individuals, especially women (*Karena's*...vi)

Karena's Cross chronicles the cultural practices that strengthen female subordination. These practices include: Child Marriage, Marriage by abduction, Marriage by Inheritance, Boy Child Preference, Female Genital Mutilation, Isolating Women in Menstrual Sheds, Obnoxious Widowhood Rites, and Commercial Sexual Exploitation. These cultural practices still hold sway in many traditional African settings and they are dangerous because they infringe on the dignity and humanity of women on the continent.

The exposition of these practices through the dramatic medium as is the case with *Karena's Cross* is a valiant effort to give voice to the African woman. The dramatic piece clearly identifies with even as it speaks to and for all women who are subsumed under male authority

and ways. It is also a response to marginalization, a dissent to an obligatory silence, and an expression of the need to create the new African woman who is recognized, respected and accepted on the continental space.

The Eponymous Character Karena projects a confidence that women can and are coming out of the culture of silence in spite of the cultural chains with which they are shackled to male hegemony. According to her:

I fought against a war of
Inferiority because I was
Never born to be inferior.
I fought to illuminate my world
Because I was not born to be in the dark.
I have come to realise that failing to
Fight for what you want is
The worst form of suicide
And self-destruction (33)

A strong point of advocacy in the Play as it concerns women of Africa and indeed the entire world is the urgent need to encourage global girl child education. Women should also be wholesomely encouraged to imbibe the social tradition of including their fathers' names to form part of their marital names. This will go a long way in ensuring that their former identities will not be eroded when they get married and leave their fathers' houses for their husbands' homes. The inclusion of her maiden name to her new identity keeps her firmly rooted in her past and present realities.

This opens up the best of both worlds to her. She is recognised and associated with her ancestry, her father's heritage and her husband's family lineage. African parents, especially fathers will no longer feel trepidation at the thought of educating their female children if they as fathers are sure that even after marriage, their names will continue to live on in their daughters just as it does in their sons.

This was made manifest in *Karena's Cross* when Karena's husband, Dr Daniels saw nothing wrong with Karena including her Father's name to his name when they got married. It was that singular action that led to Nemughan realising that the beautiful well-educated lawyer wife of the young Doctor is in fact his own daughter Karena who had run away from home all those years ago. He came to this realisation when Dr Daniels introduced his wife as Mrs Karena Nemughan-Daniels. On hearing the name 'Nemughan', her father exclaimed:

Karena as Nemughan: Karena!

My Daughter! Is this you?
Is this your husband?
A medical Doctor
And you are now a lawyer.

Despite all that I did to you
 You still mention my name
 In public gatherings like this
 Before your husband's name?
 Oh Nemughan!
 So, this is possible? A girl child
 Can bear her father's name
 In her husband's house?
 My little daughter has taught Owei-ama
 A big lesson. We have been wasting
 The destiny of the girl child from
 Generation to generation (32).

Karena refused to accept the culturally redundant mores intended to pin her and all women down. She struggles to create for herself, a new reality. Her dream and aspirations of becoming a well-educated working-class woman could not be subdued. Her resilience was rewarded when her dream finally came true.

Conclusion

The Essay investigated these two Plays in the areas of theme, with a cursory reference to characterization. It acknowledges the playwrights' recognition of the relegation of women in public and private life as well as their compulsion toward confrontation and voice restoration. The approaches of resistance deployed in these plays by Karena, Koko and the women of Erhuwaren range from the ideological assertion of self-reliance for African woman to the reinvention of women's dignity. These Plays locate cases of women oppression in the context of the numerous, reformist ideologies adjoining the conditions of twentieth to twenty first century Africa which prioritizes women's freedom from cultural subjugation, economic exploitation and a pledge to gender equality. In writing for the African stage, these playwrights whose awareness of a feminist perspective encapsulate the experience of African women is revealed in relation to other social issues. It is significant to note that the plays in question perform and mount the female voice on the African stage.

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