

Female voice and space in Fred Agbeyegbe's *The King Must Dance Naked and Woe unto Death*

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Abstract

This paper is to examine the fictional expression of female voice and space as a powerful feminist mode of resistance against patriarchy, while examining such terms as feminism, womanism, voice and space as they relate to female expression of self-identity. Womanism is applied in the African context to explore the social cultural setting and female struggles in Fred Agbeyegbe's *The King Must Dance Naked and Woe Unto Death*. This paper addresses issues like discrimination, stereotyping, patriarchy, oppression, and sexual rights. This study will also make known the positive transformation of the woman's voice and space, such that women are not marginalized but are treated equally in all spheres of life. The African woman, like most women out there can be a full time house wife and also cope with her social and political lifestyle. The study concludes that the female personnel in the two plays under investigation are those who are able to disregard and rise above patriarchy in the African cultural space.

Keywords: Characterization, feminism, space, voice, womanism

Introduction

This paper analyses Fred Agbeyegbe as a writer who concerns himself with projecting enviable female characters with self-expression and identity peculiar with contemporary realities. Agbeyegbe recognizes the full and complete woman, plays up the powerful role of women by portraying women positively. African literature is bursting with works that project male dominance and inadequately plead the case of the African woman. These works presents female characters who are not necessarily likeable or even admirable, but are entirely themselves without any inhibitions. This means giving overlooked historical women a voice. The ideal female character created by male writers often acts within the framework of her traditional role as a wife and mother. In the African society, the respect and love a woman earns are relative to the extent of her adaptation to these primary roles. For instance, while Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo the protagonist in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) slaughters a goat for one of his wives who has three sons in a row, Elechi Amadi's Madume a gender stereotypical in the *Concubine* (1966) is

demoralized by his wife's inability to produce a son, because men as seen as more valuable. On the other hand, a barren woman is stigmatized, considered misfit and invites the wrath of her in-laws.

The African woman and contemporary discourse

Over the years researchers focus mainly on the oppressive state in which the females find themselves without attending to the main plight of females, which is denial of space and voice. This paper examines Agbeyegbe's *The King Must Dance Naked and Woe Unto Death* (1998) clearing the air that every woman has right to be successful because like Egwaruna, Queen Odosun, King Omajuwa and Alero, they can weather any storm. It is clear that male writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, J.P. Clark and Elechi Amadi think of women differently from the way Agbeyegbe does. He presents and redefines women as they feel and want to be presented. Hence the concept of feminism will be relevant to both texts; *The King Must Dance Naked and Woe Unto Death*, in the

agitation for female voice and space in the society.

The space occupied by African women in contemporary discourse is still a domain that has not been adequately explored, despite an increasing interest from within and outside the continent. The invention of the African woman is being interrogated by several female writers but hiatus still exists and this gives the impression of voicelessness and absence. African feminism explores the inscription of the Africa woman on the continent and diaspora, recognizing her circumscription in many areas of contemporary experience. It emphasizes the need for an extension of boundaries so as to facilitate a validation of her participation as woman. African feminism assents the African woman's narrative and viewpoints as routes to understanding her experiences. Oppositional discourse has emerged in various ways and it is necessary to probe the unexplored areas of the African woman's audibility and visibility to assess the limits of her voicelessness. One of the most outspoken African women, Daphne Williams Ntiri (pp. xviii, 1994), has succinctly made known the dilemma in which African women have found themselves for years. In the absence of viable organized women groups, they have been invited to embrace feminism as an instrument of emancipation and as a new source of empowerment and status building. Unfortunately, most women like Queen Irhorho in *The King Must Dance Naked* rejects feminism for a multiplicity of reasons, living their lives apologizing for their femaleness and femininity.

This essay will demonstrate that, if the female is given same opportunity as men to express herself and feel unoccupied in the Nigerian patriarchal society, she would adequately empower herself and the community. Characters like King Omajuwa

and her mother Queen Odosun in *The King Must Dance Naked*, Egwaruna and Princess Ogbodu in *Woe Unto Death* represent proactive females that cannot be intimidated by challenges. The women in both plays are blunt, resourceful, manipulative, focused and hardworking on launching their selves to the center.

Feminism and womanism: A theoretical investigation

Feminism is the belief that men and women deserve equal rights and opportunities in all spheres of life. It aims at defining, establishing and defending equal opportunities for women. It also denotes the activities of women and male 'sympathizers', and its aim is to combat all forms of discrimination - social, personal, economic, legal, health and lots more which women suffer simply because of their sex (Esther Chioma Uwandu, 2018). The author of *The King Must Dance Naked* and *Woe Unto Death* is a sympathizer, who understands the plight of women and is sensitive to them and their struggles. He projects the image of women of valour in creating narratives and space for women. Roselind Delamar (1994) defines feminism as a political movement of women's response to their own oppression. Alice Walker defines feminism thus:

Feminism is the political theory that struggles to free all women: women of color, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women (Smith 49)

In her work, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, Walker (1983) defines womanism

within a black context and an emergent femaleness or femininity coming of age. She posits that:

A black feminist or feminist of color..... who loves other women, appreciates and prefers women's culture sometimes loves individual men, sexually and /or nonsexually committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female... womanist is to feminism as purple to lavender (Walker xi).

According to Mary Kolawole (1997), in her book *Womanism and African Consciousness*, African womanism is a term coined in the late 1980s by Clenora Hudson-Weems, intended as an ideology applicable to all women of African descent. It concentrates on African culture, focusing on the struggles, experiences, needs and desires of the African woman. Womanism holds that men and women should make harmony their utmost concern; this harmony should be in the home and in the society at large. It is communal in its orientation and goes beyond the husband and wife situation. It is not whistle blowing but reality for peaceful co-existence.

The United Nations in Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, says everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedom of expression without distinction of any kind such as race, sex, color, language, political, national or social origin. The *King James Bible* version of the bible also admonishes in Galatians 3:28; "that there is neither Greek nor Jews, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Paul). This verse in the Bible portrays equality in both

sexes. Females can equally exercise their rights as to voice and space accorded to them in the society in which they find themselves. The call for African woman to break the yoke of silence like Egwaruna, Princess Ogbodu, King Omajuwa and Queen Odosun in both plays has been made by African women who are genuinely concerned. They do not have a reason to apologize for their femininity; neither do they let it stop their dream. Since Awa Thiam cried out in 1978 in her classic work *Speak Out*, women writers from the continent have responded to the challenges of oppressed women so they could speak for themselves.

The concept of space and voice

In her book *Gender and Identity* Tess Onwueme discusses what she calls the "Phenomenal sacred space" of the African woman (2004:1). This is the space society allocates to women on the basis of tradition and custom. Tess sees the 'female space' in Africa as one limiting women's self-expression because the girl is conditioned to believe and accept that her space is always adequate and she should adjust her activities to fit in the space rather than seek to expand the space in which she finds herself. The scope of female space is directly determined by the male through his 'superior' self-appointed position as the executor of tradition. Women operate in an imposed silent situation that is designed to keep them within their prescribed space of domesticity. This silence is what feminist and some male writer like Agbeyege write about.

The female voice tends to connote presence of self-expression. Speech is the voice of the heart, while tone of voice shows what the speaker is feeling. Voice can be looked at from speech, as the words of a person that reflect her feelings, experiences and limitation which only her voice can

express. Maya Angelou's, *The Heart of a Woman* is in search of her identity and space. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* is another text that discusses the idea of space as it concerns *Efuru*, whose space is marginalized. But

According to Janet Parpart (2010), voice or the act of speaking is not often identified in much of the feminist literature and key conditions of demonstrating women's empowerment. The search for women's empowerment has thus become a search for women's voices, particularly the moments when the women they speak against patriarchal authority. World Health Organization (WHO) study on health and violence points out that:

Most abused women are not passive victims. Some women resist, others flee, while others attempt to keep the space by giving in to their husband's demand. What may seem to an outside observer to be lack of positive response by the women may in fact be a calculated assessment of what is needed to survive in the marriage and protect herself and her children (3).

The character Avowal Firdaus, in Nawal El Saadawi's book titled *Woman at Point Zero* shows that subjugated women on rebound need their space. This is evidential because Avowal fulfillment was made possible because she has her space.

Decision making is an exclusionary practice in which the female voice is consciously mute. This is visible in Agbeyegbe's *The King Must Naked and Woe Unto Death* supporting the feminist goals of defining, establishing and

defending equal civil, political, economic and social right for women. Voice clearly relates to identify and self-expression. Therefore, in analyzing the female voice and space, a critical look is beamed at the female heroine's rights in both texts in line with which they express themselves creating personal spaces. This is discussed through their character, dialogue, imitative and achievements.

The dialectics of female voices and spaces

Both plays open the eyes of their readers to see how valuable women are in the society. This is achieved with the Agbeyegbe focusing on the strength of women and their self-reliance. *The King Must Dance Naked* is a thought-provoking play made up of two scenes and six acts about the succession of the Itsekiri king. It is a compelling story showing that the author is not just giving a voice to the female characters but to female readers as well. The playwright uses the various plays to run a commentary on not just the Itsekiri tradition of secession, but on every other traditional institution where the tradition is still rigid on the first male surviving son succeeding a parting king. Apparently, the succession tradition makes it expedient that every reigning king must as quick as possible have a male child who must succeed him. The major conflict in *The King Must Dance Naked* is the inability of King Omajuwa a demigirl, to marry and procreate twenty nine years after he ascended the throne. Afinotan, the chief priest and the spoke-person of the gods, divines that the childlessness of the king and the impending doom as a result of the unavailability of heir apparent to the throne is responsible for the plagues, famine and general suffering of the people. It is a bit disturbing that an African king, if not under a spell or curse by the gods could reign

without a wife and a child for twenty nine whole years.

However, the playwright uses a play-within - play technique to demystify the mystery of a king reigning for 19 years without a wife or a child (18-23). In the flash back (play-within-a-play) past king Omajuwa 8th takes Babesigiwa, one of his palace maids to bed. Babesigiwa now known as Queen Odosun, bears the king a set of twins, a boy and a girl. It is the wisdom of the gods that they sacrifice the girl child to them. But Queen Odosun who is "a very ferocious queen mother and schemer, who rises from the rank of a chambermaid to a queen, decides to shame the gods. In spite of the insistence of the gods that the girl child must be sacrificed, she presented the male child. The pronouncement by the gods is to prevent the taboo of a woman becoming a king. Perhaps, the gods had thoughts that it will be better to sacrifice the girl child than risk their wraths.

It is disastrous for a man to wrestle with his chi (Achebe 40). Queen Odosun decides to wrestle with her chi by swindling the gods. She craftily presents the boy child as sacrifice to the gods and resolves to spare the life of the girl child in view that:

She is a girl, but a girl, who would be king. He is a boy, who knows what he will grow to be? A rogue, a clerk or a priest oh! A rogue, a clerk or a priest who knows. (P. 37).

Odosun walks herself to death. However, not without manipulating the installment of her daughter as, king of Ogbodume against the tradition of the land and the warning of the gods. The girl child reigns as king

Omajuwa 9th in disguise, hence her inability to marry and produce an heir to the throne.

The disappearance of the rock and the desire to recover it leads to the resolution in the play. With the missing rock and the appearance of Mejebi, they demystify the man-woman riddle. Mejebi emerges and claims responsibly of the missing rock. He further corroborates Afinotan's request that the king must dance naked in the presence of four chiefs if the pestilence ravishing the people of Ogbodume must come to an end. Mejebi, to the chagrin of all declares that Omajuwa is his mother. The king dances naked and all are awed that a woman has been ruling over them as king hence the taboo and the gods were proved right, after which the right heir had the throne.

In *Woe Unto Death*, the play opens with Queen Irorho singing a dirge. Irorho is the eldest wife of the ailing King Asamaigon who is in a vegetable state. Rather than the sympathy the ailing king deserves, his children Eyitwoyo and Eyinmode are busy rehearsing the anticipation of a coronation the moment the king dies. Ewo, the priest from the kingdom called 30th reveals that the king's favourite wife, Egwaruna, Princess Ogbodu and Prince Eyitwoyo heir to the throne, are responsible for the king's predicament.

Ewo: The three witches are within the walls of the palace. We will not resort to the ways of the ancients. In no time we will untie the oracle knots. Assemble the inhabitants of the palace (pp. 26).

Egwaruna, scared of becoming a widow wants the king, her husband, to live longer than he ought to. Ogbodu wants the heir to the throne Eyitwoyo dead so her brother

Eyinmode can be king. Eyitwoyo wants the king dead because he is in a hurry to become king, while the king chooses to die so Eyitwoyo his heir can be king. The plays chronicles a mixture of different emotions; women on a journey to discover themselves, gain relevance and have their voices heard. The playwright puts away the negative perceptions and challenges which control and limit women. The concept of both plays is space.

In several studies, females are regarded as less than males in their use of intellectual skills in pursuit of what they really want in life. Queen Odosun in Agbeyegbe's *The King Must Dance Naked*, Egwaruna and Ogbodu in *Woe Unto Death* are went beyond boundary to get what they want by positioning themselves as womanists. In addition, womanism which can be accompanied by power within the changing society – changes in domestic arena, and work place. Womanism focuses on the Africa woman's sense of self, her identity which is clearly demonstrated in Agbeyegbe's *The King Must Dance Naked* and *Woe Unto Death*.

Voices, space and characterisation.

A look at the following characters in the plays will be a guide as to the issue of the female voice and space. Bagiwa eventually known as Queen Odosun, who was referred to as a 'chambermaid' eventually becomes queen mother. She is able to fight against cultural setbacks and societal belief that a woman cannot be made king. She is a ferocious queen mother and a schemer who rose from a chambermaid to a queen is determined and calculating character that never lets opportunity slip. Queen Odosun can bribe her way to relate well to all the people beneficial in her plot. She could communicate and discuss issues as it concerns both men and the gods towards the

fulfillment of her desire. Agbeyegbe portrays Queen Odosun not as a victim of male subjugation like Queen Irorho but as a woman who utilizes opportunity. She positions herself in favour of the king when Queen Lube passes on. As queen, she sends away Prince Omagbemi, heir to the throne so that her unborn child could be the king. She gives birth to a set of twins, the gods want the girl child sacrificed. According to Afinotan; "she might be king". But the boastful and confrontational queen does not see anything wrong with the people having a female king, hence she plays the gods by exchanging the twin. She is ready to attack the gods same way she attacked the chief priest Afinotan; "and those gods, I wish I could lay my hands on one of them. Just one to serve as an example" (25). But her heinous nature does not make her less a mother, she loves her children so much that she is ready to do anything to keep them; "I bore you for nine months...nine good months. No woman who has endured labour would give her child up for sacrifice. Not if the whole world is collapsing" (25). Her desperation leads her to bribe the gods, but Afinotan tells her his powers to do that are limited; "Two cows, three, four, five cows, ten cows! A herd... there's got to be a way" (28).

King Omajuwa, daughter of Queen Odosun, who breaks the rule of the land by crowning her female- male daughter as king. Aside those who were part of the conspiracy with the queen to make Omajuwa king, every other indigene of Ogbodume believes their king of nineteen years is male. She has a genuine motherhood sense, caring and calm. She is not entertained when the dancing and singing, instead, the pestilence bothers her; "The ship of state is being threatened by many leakages; soon we will be drowned. But they are enjoying it, singing and dancing" (Pg. 6). Her motherly

love for her subjects and citizens leads her to journey out in search of peace. She meets and falls in love with her half-brother Omagbemi, thus betraying her motherhood to show him love. In the course of being exposed by her son Mejiebi, she remains calm, confident and boastful; "Enough! You have said enough...now tell the people. Where is the rock you stole? That is all we want to know" (Pg. 71).

Princess Ogbodu eldest daughter of the King Asamaigon and his eldest wife, Queen Irorho. She is innovative and desirous of a change, of oppressive law in society and vows to change tradition of succession that insists on only eldest child of a deceased king. Ogbodu in Act 1 scene 2 says:

"How long must this go on for? Fate, gods, ancestral arrangements.

Why should I abide by their dictates; they never consulted me

When they never consulted me when they were drawing up the rules. I hereby pledge myself to change all this ha. I Princess Ogbodu, the first child ever of King Asamaigon, hereby resolve to change this nonsense my brother must succeed to that throne".

Ogbodu like Odosun desires change and believes that society should not discriminate between sexes. She questions the patriarchal system that bans a female child from inheriting the throne of her demised king and father? Why must it be only the male eldest son that inherits the throne of a demised king? These enigmatic questions impel her to wish the king dead. She protests

the ill treatment of her mother Queen Irorho by her father the king. Ogbodu dies because she is too ambitious. Egwaruna on the other hand loves the king so much that she visits the graveyard to confront death; "show me death or I will kill you in this place first". She wants her husband King Asamaigon to live forever. There is autonomy of power, because the female characters are free to think and be what they want without patriarchal or custom restrictions. They see everything as achievable hence, Odosun makes her demigirl daughter Omajuwa king. She is gloriously crowned by the chiefs and the chief priest Afinotan. This goes for Ogbodu in *Woe Unto Death* who sees her sitting on the throne a possibility.

The female political space

Being an African woman means courage, undeniable gustiness, being extraordinary and out to be a phenomenal achiever. Agbeyegbe puts away the negative perceptions and challenges which try to control or limit the woman. It is courage that makes Odosun to achieve the impossible in the world of impossibility; "but there was a rule: no woman whatever beautiful, resourceful was allowed to rule" (Pg. 5). In politics women are not docile or powerless. Women have ability to control resources and people in a household and community just like Queen Omajuwa and her mother Odosun. Omajuwa is able to display good leadership and at same time ensures a peaceful reign.

The female domestic space

Women have always been on the receiving end when it comes to domestic violence and through the character of Alero (*The King Must Dance Naked*) it explores how wives desperately go out of their way to please their husbands. The only space that a patriarchal society accords to the female is

domestic space. This is seen in Queen Irorho's character. She is obedient and submissive without bothering about the way her husband King Asamaigon treats and prefers her to Egwaruna. Even when her daughter Ogbodu objects, she sees it as fate; "... They flow from fate. I cannot grudge Egwaruna; it's her star. You see, in my father's household my mother was the favourite wife, all the other women put up with lot. I must take me with equanimity" (Pg. 19).

Women and patriarchy

The State of Feminism in Africa Today by Patricia Mafadden, defines African Feminism as being fundamentally the struggle by women against Patriarchy control and exclusion, as portrayed in Fred Agbeyegbe's *The King Must Dance Naked*. Ogbodu resistance of patriarchy, she strongly wishes to be king; "How long must this go on for? Fate, gods, ancestral arrangements. Why should I abide by the dictates; they never consulted me when they were drawing up the rules. I hereby pledge myself to change all this hu ha" (Pg. 20). After the death of her brothers Eyitwoyo and Eyinmode, she picks up the crown and crowns herself, running towards the throne she drops dead. She tries hard to satisfy herself even when it did not seem right. Against all odd she disobeys the chiefs and priest from the kingdom called 30th without considering the consequences.

Ogunyemi C. Okonjo (1985), in her essay the Dynamics of Contemporary Black Female Novel In English portrays herself as a black feminist, who loves other women, appreciates and prefers women's culture, committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. This is illustrated in *The King Must Dance Naked* where King Omajuwa in the bid to creating her own space still look out for her citizen

welfare by journeying out in search of peace and sorts way to end the pestilence. Alice Walker (1983) in her work *In search of our Mother's Garden* defines a womanist as a black feminist who loves other women, appreciates and prefers women's culture, and is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, both male and female. The king Omajuwa protected Alero when she was thrown out of the house by her husband Tofe. He provides accommodation for her in the palace and promises her a decent job; "woman rise we shall get you a responsible job. Go and pack your belongings and live here in our palace. Bring your husband too" (Pg. 15). Womanism is best applicable in the Nigerian setting, because it helps to achieve goals as it pertains to both sexes for the betterment of society at large. Recognition of women's voice and space will bring about positive transformation of the society, such that women are not marginalized but are treated equally.

We can deduce that, traditional structures are one of the mountains on the back of an African woman. It is fostered through the gender socialization process which connects macho strength and heroism to males. This assertion helps to buttress the fact that African women have long been oppressed, and there is a need to allow them their space and voice, women are not passive but active body of consciousness and action.

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