

The Wounded Women: A Feminist Analysis of Olu Obafemi's *Collected Plays*

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Introduction

Olu Obafemi proves in his plays to be a legacy of both our colonial past and our post-colonial present. His writings, especially the plays, portend a future of conflictual dynamics between this past and present and the resulting thesis or synthesis. Obafemi assists us through his theatre, to dive into the worlds of social, economic, political and environmental problems that face us. The power relations in his plays help to explain our blurred history, especially what phallic or patriarchal power has turned it to become.

For the characters in Obafemi's Plays, it is necessary to lock horns with the forces of annihilation. Also, conscience needs to be a mirror through which they can see themselves and become relevant in their society.

The characters which are of concern to the present writer are the female ones, who bear gashes in their spirits and physical bodies. They bear burdens which a cruel society forces on them, thereby making them zombies. One has decided to christen these women wounded women because most of them bear economic, political and social wounds.

In a country where women's dreams are born and nurtured and later on strangled by the same society which gave rise to them in the first place, a lot of anguish is witnessed. For these women, their debilitating situation is one of concern to them. However, what do they do about it? Does Obafemi assist in any way?

The women fight for themselves in a group effort at self-affirmation. Moreover, Obafemi helps the women to rise up and fight their enemy. The militancy of these women is as a result of the constant experience they have

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within a cashocentric community of kleptocrats and not democrats.

The Universe of *Nights of a Mystical Beast*, *The New Dawn* and *Suicide Syndrome* will suffice for an analysis of these wounded women from a feminist perspective.

Literature Review

Feminism has been identified as having different shades and manifestations. The various types acknowledge the under-representation, the hemlining and the oppression of women in text and context. The feminist movement advocates equality, equity and fairness between the genders.

In focussing on the feminist argument in *Collected Plays* by Olu Obafemi, the first base of argument is this: women are highly disadvantaged and discriminated against in the Nigerian society. Secondly, there is the need for women to be emancipated through economic, political and social empowerment. This struggle is obvious in the plays assessed from the feminist perspective.

A feminist could be a male or female playwright theorist or critic. De Beauvoir (1984:32) defines feminists as:

...women – or even men, too – who are fighting to change women's condition, in association with the class struggle, but independently of it as well, without making the changes they strive for totally dependent on changing society as a whole.

In another vein, Aidoo (1986:16) considers a feminist to be a visionary male or female who “commits his or her energies actively, to exposing the sexist tragedy of women's history...”

What is feminism? It is an ideology which aims at articulating the discontent women and men feel over the inequality between the sexes. Susan Griffin (1982:278) declares that feminism:

Holds the premise that one may control reality with the mind, assert the ideal as the more real than reality, or place idea as an authority above nature, and even above our sensual experience of nature...

What Griffin (1982) suggests is that reality should be subdued to the minds of women.

French (1985:442) addresses this female reality and affirms that:

Feminism is the only serious, coherent, and universal philosophy that offers an alternative to patriarchal thinking and structures... feminists believe that women are human beings, that the two sexes are (at least) equal in all significant ways and that this equality must be publicly recognised.

Therefore, the view by Hartstock (1985:23) may become necessary to buttress the two positions above. In the opinion of Hartstock, certain ideas against women need to be corrected. In her view, "a feminist standpoint":

Can allow us to descend further into materiality to an epistemological level at which we can better understand both why patriarchal institutions and ideologies take such perverse and deadly forms and how both theory and practice can be redirected in more liberatory directions.

It is through the practice of writing therefore, that Obafemi advocates a corrective stance to what society wrongly does to women. However, as a hybrid ideology, feminism is of the English, French and American brands (Showalter 1986:249). To her, the English feminist movement is Marxist and highlights the 'oppression' of women, while the French option is psychoanalytic in its approach and emphasises 'repression'. The American version to her is highly textual and analyses the 'expression' of women's ideas. After the excursion through the plays, it is recognised that the oppression, repression and expression of women are dominant through these characters. These could be seen in the following characters in Obafemi's Plays. Ajon, the Queen mother, Kay and Ngozi, the Virgins, Binta and Moji and the Prostitutes in *Nights of a Mystical Beast*. In *Suicide Syndrome* the mother and her child and the wife also epitomise these situations.

Despite these continental distinctions within the camp of feminism, other forms of feminism are the radical, bourgeois, cultural, black and lesbian feminism (Simpson 1981:66). The feminist approach which therefore suits Obafemi's drama, is the Marxist – feminist stance. This strand is vitriolic, insurgent in its analyses of class, sex, oppression and how they relate to production and reproduction within the public and private realms. The historian Berenice Carroll relates this stance to labour matters (1980:455).

To the Marxist–feminist, ideas which relate to class origins and stratification in the family and economic relations are merged (Meehan

1990:191).

The Wounded Women in Obafemi's Plays – Critical Analysis

The Wounded Women in Obafemi's Plays are victims in the society. They range from the poor to the prosperous, the learned to the unlearned and from the young to the old. In *Nights of a Mystical Beast*, the women are situated firstly, in a pre-colonial priest-dominated milieu. This first encounter with wounded women, reveals them as labourers, hitting the soil with their calloused heels. By the second part of the play, colonial infiltrators had taken over Giroland.

What this portends is that the women come under the influence of divisive and alienatory discourses of power. Here, AGURUMO – the beast torments the people. The heroes of the land are only remembered with nostalgia and Obafemi's attempt at revising history is but a feeble one as second politician declares:

Our skies must be cleared of this fog of myths, revealing... freedom beyond Giro (p.24).

One is forced to ask – freedom from whom? If the myths are cleared, what do we replace them with? How would the citizens fare if and when Giro is demythologised? Perhaps, Obafemi is desirous of a *tabula rasa* situation, where a new beginning is the goal of everyone.

Another perspective of wounded womanhood is related to us in *Ajon*, the Queen Mother whose sons are sold into slavery, leaving only the old (p.10). The effect of the enslavement of youths is seen in a future of waste in Giroland. Virgins and nubile women therefore pine endlessly. Marriages do not take place because the Raba people buy the marriageable sons (p.11).

The dramatist as prophet materializes when *Nights of a Mystical Beast*, almost two decades old, reveals Obafemi's vision of 1986 still relevant in the year 2001.

By the second part of the play, what become evident are the various forms of wounds the women suffer, from the psychological, mental, physical, political, and spiritual to the social wounds.

The three scarlet women otherwise known as 'suffering sisters' suffer all these wounds. They are no different from the beggars, Binta, the Engineer and Moji, the journalist, who are also deprived and disenchanting with

national-leaders. Still cataloguing wounded women, we are confronted by the members of the Unionist – Giro Kilocho Ase Club (GKC), who are of easy virtue, but married to men. Again, there are the two strumpets, and the Dee Madams, numbering three.

The Madams are bruised as a result of not reaping the gains of independence, due to the experience of domestic violence and spousal abandonment (pp.30-31). Because these women are in the society, one doubts if salvation will ever come their way. They see no choice before them in the scheme of things, than to remain geishas, pawns and objects in the hands of the oppressors. They see themselves as prey to the marauding beasts of injustice, thievery, poverty of spirit, economic lack and doom.

Society is the guilty party here, as it cannot afford to correct the wretchedness of its own people, or give them the fulfilment of their Utopia. Society becomes a shade that beclouds the women's miserable existence.

Nevertheless, Obafemi accords them some saving grace by conscientizing them and making them to demand immediate restitution from this "oil-damned age" (p.30). Moji counts on sorroral force to make an impact on the women who have become alienated from the society. She preaches a change of attitude to them. But an existential will becomes evident as the women are divided between those who want to change and those who prefer their status. Perhaps what the elephant shape of Agurumo signifies, is the metaphor of interpretation – to everyman his view of life and impression of what it stands for. Therefore, each of the wretched has a different pinch in the shoes of affliction, in terms of degree and intensity. No two victims are the same. Hence, Obafemi did not just portray low – cadre women, but bluestockings as well.

The canvas Obafemi evolves in *The New Dawn* is not different. We witness in it, a crisis of consciousness, social angst and anomie. We now wonder – what happens to insiders who defy indigenous cultic paradigms? Funke and Aina defy the Oro Cult, but run for cover when its members approach. The playwright does not answer this question fully, but intermixes the situation around the cult with historical allusions to Bohassa, revolts and genocide all over Africa (p.47), as well as the wasted womanhood on our University campuses. The traditional beliefs' hold on educated and elitist women comes to the foreground here. The women in this play are the causalities of wasters, who themselves become wasted eventually.

Ironically, the women of the new awakening only talk, but hardly act to change the situation of their fellow women. This advances the position of

