

RE-READING OF INTRA-GENDER CONFLICTS: ANALYSIS OF FRENZIED WOMEN CHARACTERS IN TESS ONWUEME'S DRAMA, *TELL IT TO WOMEN*

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Abstract: This paper provides a critical overview of the treatment of the questions of identity and survival of the Igbo rural women in Africa in the socio-political and culture sphere; which are reflected in the Afro-American dramatist Osonye Tess Onwueme's drama: *Tell It to Women*. The issues of identity and survival are explored against the back drop of the cultural and emotional clashes between the city women and their rural counterparts. The critical question raised in the drama, *Tell It To Women* is, where do Igbo rural women in Africa position themselves in their society when they are forced to follow patriarchal norms, deprived of socio-political and cultural rights and finally expected to copy the westernised notion of feminism. The rural women fight, collectively, against their new exploitative master of the modern times: the city women! The paper further analyses the presentation of the female characters in the said drama. The paper concludes that the Igbo rural women in Africa would enjoy empowerment in real sense only if they are allowed to be part of their Igbo cosmology and shouldn't be forced force to part away with it.

Key words: De-womanization, Dual sex system, Motherhood.

Introduction : Eugene B Redmond calls, Tess Onwueme, who is Igbo writer, as 'an African - Nigerian - Igbo - woman - feminist - artist' (Onwueme 16) since she writes, deliberately, women centric play. *Tell It to Women* depicts the intra-gender clashes between the rural women and city counterparts. It focuses on the Idu village cosmology and the futility behind applying the westernized notion of feminism for the upliftment of African women as, one of rural female character named Tolu, suggest to her fellow women to "take the meat and eggs and throw away the rest" (48). These female characters, either at individual level or at the collective level, frenziedly fight against the exploitative agencies and, try to find the solution to the problem they face in their immediate environment. In an interview (2004) Tess Onwueme states: 'We live in a society where women have it hard. Their lives are manipulated by others' (Uko 271) In this paper the researcher proposes to have critical analysis of the female characters which have been depicted in this play and their fight to maintain the importance of Igbo cosmology as a part of their heritage in midst of the wave of globalization. Their character analysis help to understand their socio-cultural set up and their perception about it. Although the discussion treats the topics separately, in the drama, they are integrated as a part of the organic whole.

Rural and Urban women characters: In the play, *Tell It to Women*, Tess Onwueme, brings the light upon the intra-gender conflict between educated city women and their rural counterpart. Daisy and Ruth both are city women whereas Sherifat, Yemoja, Tolu, Adaku, Ajaka etc are the groups of rural women. In the post-colonial Nigeria, since city women are fortunate enough to have access to

western education they are holding higher positions as professors, officers etc. In the drama, Daisy holding a government post, though married shares lesbian relationship with Ruth who is a single and an academician. Both consider themselves "torchbearers of sisterhood" (TTW 54) but unfortunately, they are pretentious and fake. They are assigned to introduce a Government approved programme and visit to Idu village. This programme is called, 'Better life For rural Women' which intends, to bring "comfort, laughter and power (to rural women)..." by offering, "all the modern appliances that lighten the burden of womanhood" (TTW 46-47); since it guarantees rural women access to electricity, air conditioner, refrigerator, gas cooker etc. Rural women, too wants to benefit out of this program and wish to "long for stars..." (TTW 29). Molaria Ogun-dipe-Leslie posits out that rural wants power, wealth and status like the men. She wants to ride a car rather than walk; use plastics or metal instead of calabashes; use a gas or electric stove instead of firewood, despite all our middle class nostalgia for that past. (Uko 112). The Idu village women choose Yamoja, a semi-educated women to be sent to the city for further training who will serve as liaison officer between government and as the representative of rural women for women. Later 'Better life For rural Women' programme is supposed to be launched in the city by the wife of the President who is the champion of women's cause.

Dual-sex system: Daisy's mother-in-law Sherifat, sees the world as complementary, with male and female relations as part of a whole. Daughters are named *Nnebueze* (explains Daughters have immense Mother is supreme), *Nwayibuiife* (The female is something precious). The sons are also name as *Okeibunor* (A male child is the root of the

homestead). The female child is supposed to branch out else where as a male child is considered root of the family. Further this principle of life is best articulated by Sherifat when she explains:

We see the world in circles: male is male and female is female. No one can take the place of another; no one is greater than another. Their value is not measured in terms of greater or lesser value. Each one is priceless in the order of things. Each one is part of the other, male and female. It is not a matter of male or female. ...Maize cannot take the place of yam in the cooking pot. And yam cannot take the place of maize. Each one has its own place and value in the barn" (TTW 126)

Zulu Sofola in her article "Feminism And Africa Womanhood" (Nnaemeka, 1998) comment on Dual Sex System that gives women space in socio-political fields in African lives :

Consequently, the woman has always had a vital place in the scheme of things within the African cosmology, ...dual sex system of socio-political power sharing fully developed by African people and based on following perceptions of womanhood : 1. as the divine equal of man in essence 2. as a Daughter 3. as a Mother, 4. as a wife

...In traditional Africa there exists a dual sex system in theory and in practice from the smallest family unit to the governing council of the kingdom. Consequently, both male and female citizens have parallel channels for self-expression, self-realization and relevance on all levels. It is not battle ground where women fights to clinch some of 'men's power'. Foreign culture have both ignited and fuelled a perpetuated gender conflict that has now poisoned the erstwhile healthy social of traditional Africa (54-62)

Further, Daisy's husband ridicules her for replacing "bookish sense of wisdom" with the "common sense" and choking her family with the western notion of feminism. He asks her to know about her own people and their culture before joining the "feminist bandwagon". When Okil questions Daisy to identify her actual enemy against who she wishes to wage the war, she has no answer and she fumbles. Okie further informs Daisy that the binary logic of Either/OR is not applicable in the Idu world : "(in Idu world)where everything is : man AND woman, good AND evil, night AND day etc ...rural women wont let you take them for ride" (TTW 93)

Clenora Hudson - Wheems in her article entitled "African Womanism" (Nnaemeka, 1998) explains the dynamics of the relationship between African men and women claming African men and women and does not view the former as the enemy of the latter and she quotes African sociologist Joyce Ladner as below : " Black women do not

perceive their enemy to be black men, but rather the enemy is considered to be oppressive forces in the larger society which subjugate black men, women and children" (Lander 1072:277-78)

De-womanization : It is said that the beginning of the de-womanization of African womanhood started with introduction of western education with its philosophy of gender bias. Zulu Sofola in her article "Feminism And Africa Womanhood" (1998) (Nnaemeka, 1998), quotes Sudarkasa, Niara to comments on de-womanization of African womanhood:

The first level of damage was done when the female lines of authority and socio-political power were destroyed and completely eliminated by the foreign Europeans/ Arabian male-centred system of authority and governance... then, in quick succession, three of four realities of African womanhood - her reality as a woman, the equal of a man in essence; her reality as a daughter; and her reality as a mother - were drastically reduced, giving way to the prominence of her reality as wife... Consequently, she developed an incurable dependence and inferiority complex that had not existed when her active and relevant existence in the other three realities had balanced the fourth reality of wifehood. Gradually she grew to be irrelevant, ineffective radiant and dull. (1987: 25-42 61)

The urban women, despite, education and exposure look down upon the rural women. Chosen by Idu village, Yamoja, always thought it is a golden opportunity to make her own identity, to get trained through the government sanctioned programme and then to guide her fellow women. In fact she fights against her husband and parents to join Ruth and Daisy. Daisy perceives Yemoja, just another 31 years of maids, humiliates her calling 'Empress of Gutter' and a 'dense, thick-headed..(women)easier to manage' (TTW 69). Daisy calls rural women 'backward babies' and 'baby factories'. Daisy's constant "dressing down" breaks Yamoja's confidence in herself. She is hurt and disappointed. Yamoja suppose do follow few rule in Daisy's house like Yamoja should get up 3am in the morning everyday, she should start her day by ironing Daisy's daughter, Bose's clothes and her husbands' clothes. Later Yamoja should clean entire house, Yamoja should cook breakfast on time and never be late. She should also set the table for Daisy and her family. Yamoja should, strictly wash her hands while cooking the food. Yamoja's duty is to cook the meal. Never she should 'steal' the meal. Yemoja has been told never to touch Daisy's food. Yemoja shouldn't piss in Daisy's toilet. Yamoja shouldn't touch the food with her fingers because as per Daisy's observation Yamoja is

used to dig her nose with her fingers, .Daisy will always dish out the food for Yamoja and finally Only Daisy will dish out the food fro other family members and not Yamoja. Yemoja's her dreams of 'strength in 'sisterhood', 'oneness', and 'equality of men and women' are shattered ;,disconnected to herself like a 'newly relocated hen;(98), she loses her pride , self esteem and concludes '...the city takes away the power of women . (101). She questions to Idu women later on : "Have we not gained new master , deceptively speaking in feminine voices and all in the name of Liberation (TTW 207) Yemoja claims that Better life for rural women is possible only when city people would restrict themselves by offering infrastructure to rural people without imposing their ideology on them and damaging the indigenous culture . Sherifat explains to Yemoj that the village women don't need to copy blindly the lives of city women but stick to their own life pattern . '...What we need to live is not their life , but our own...better life means where we have a hold ,not where we remain strangers and objects to be ordered around at the will of others'(TTW 102)

Obima Nnaemeka(1998) quotes Zulu Sofola's comment on *dewomanization* of African women :

..often , when one hears the western - educated African woman speak in a demeaning manner about her illiterate , rural , " traditional " counterpart , one cannot help but pity the former for her false sense of importance and delusion of grandeur. It never occur s to her that while she parrots the phrase , " what a man can do , a woman can do better , " her illiterate counterpart asserts : " What a woman can do , a man cannot do ." While she quotes the European saying , " Behind every successful man is a woman", her illiterate counterpart affirms : " The strength of a man is in his woman ", or " A soldier with a mother does not die at the war front " . While she conceives of herself as someone to be seen not heard ; her illiterate counterpart says : " If the (daughter) says that a day - old chick is a hen , so it is " While she hangs on to a wicked and bestial husband , her illiterate counterpart throws such a husband off in the spirit of the following proverb : " The burden of a husband is carried on the wife's shoulder ,not on her head ; she quickly drops it when it becomes unbearable (12)

Rural women believe that their empowerment is possible only If they stick to their own wisdom, real life experiences (not bookish knowledge as Adaku insists). Rural women don't want to follow city counterpart, blindly,but wish to take what is best for them as Tolu suggests to fellow women that they should "take the meat and eggs and throw away the rest"(TTW 48) Adaku believes Rural women

shouldn't have inferiority complex:: We to have our wisdom .We have our powers .We have our own magic!(TTW 175).City and rural both culture are worth sharing and it has to be two way process. Ajaka believes it is equally important even for rural folks to be given an opportunity to share their knowledge with modern world. : These people need to be told what we know where we are and then they, can meet us somewhere. We cannot just be running after them '(TTW 157). Tolu realises that bit urban and rural world have so many things to exchange an enrich each other's world and that way life would be better in real sense. She says:

'I think what we are looking for is.. is to add the wisdom of the new people to our own. You know to get richer... in wisdom... That is THE BETTER LIFE! Not wiping out .But adding ...adding new things to our life...not taking away the good things we already have for mere promises of value that is not yet tested ...(*TTW* 179)

The rural women fail to connect with city counterparts as Yamoja declares to Idu women " ... it is clear to us that oil and water cannot blend"(TTW 187) . Rural women expose the futility of feminism propagated by city counterpart, in following way:

Yamoja : ... We are the story that must be told ..." if you say ' yes' your Chi says "yes"..They can take all else but not our drums ..

SHERIFAT: We are the Earth ...I mean we are part of the Earth and the Earth is part of us .

Adaku: ...They say you are nothing .But you know you are jewel of the land ...They say you are suppressed but you know you are the salt o f the land ...But they say you lack power ...Earth is women .Woman is power ...

Yamoja:..we crossed many rivers to get here ...let us salute Ani , our own Goddess of Earth ...Let us salute Onokwu ,Goddess of River and the Sea ...who now use and abuse us ?..

Chorus of women: Our fellow women

Yemoja: ..We where Is the freedom modern women promise? have a place .Lets us return to Idu....where is the power in jungle city .. .where you lose your tongue and others speak for you (TTW 200-209)

In the he last scene of the drama Rural women change the performance into their New Yam festival and enact the appropriate ritual drumming rather than doing some artificial marching . Theses women know when ' ..Times are hard and treacherous..' (TTW 184) they need to be strong .The female characters Sherifat , Tolu Ajaka and Yamoja drum for women to express their strength . Their drumming echos the real strength of sisterhood. Ruth and Daisy both are seen to be confused and scared to see the drumming and dancing of rural women during the programme.

In fact ,Daisy tries to interfere when she is aghast to see her little daughter Bose carrying an effigy and dancing with rural women . However that is how , at the ,end rural women prefer to dance on their own tune rather than taking instructions from the city women .

Motherhood: The intra -gender clashes stake place because of the cultural differences among both parties .Adaku request Diasy and Ruth to explain the government scheme in the indigenous tongue. Ruth read out readymade speech which even semi-educated rural women Yamoja fail to translate due to big English words and content . Further Daisy insist in her speech address: “...leave husband and go to school...(your) lives can be fulfilled outside motherhood ...Mothering should be matter of choice ”(TTW 48).Ruth talks of taking power from men and giving it to men .Diasy and Ruth both puppet of westerner notion of feminism are unaware of Idu way of cosmology .Rural women disagree with these westerner notion of feminism propagated by Daisy and Ruth. For the women of Idu, motherhood is not simply something imposed on them by men but a means of providing access to power that men can never claim. .Adaku insists for women who “...motherhood is the ultimate power..”(TTW 36) since woman is in a position to ‘create and carry another life’ unlike men who are ‘outsiders in the process of giving birth’ Adaku criticises the modern woman’s attitude of rejecting the right of ‘motherhood’: “ I wish someone could tell them that they do not need to crush the life eggs that gives them the power of womanhood” (TTW 161) Adaku stresses women already have power in Idu , the additional power has to be the ‘power of money’(TTW 37) . Tolu reminds that even in the kitchen a woman enjoys ‘absolute control’ and no husband or male dares to ‘violate’ that power . Ajaka finds modern woman ‘strange;’ who are ‘no longer woman... (and) try to be men’ (TTW 174). Adaku accuses modern woman for her ‘atrocities’ like aborting children ,tearing family apart , dominating the men etc. Modern women burn their men , bury them alive !And they think this is what give them

power”(TTW 166).Tolu criticizes modern women for ‘brandishing a pen and using it to poke the eyes and the faces of men’(TTW 177) and calls these women under develop and illiterate considering “ motherhood” burdensome.

Carol Byce Davies (1986) brings light upon the importance of *motherhood* in African culture .

In many African societies *motherhood* defines *womanhood* .Motherhood is then crucial to woman’s status in African society .To marry and mother a child [a son preferably] , entitles a woman to more respect from her husband’s kinsmen for she can now be address as “Mother of _____”

Further he quotes Steady as below :

The most important factor with regards to the woman in traditional society is her role as mother and the centrality of this role as a whole . Even in strictly patrilineal societies , women are important as wives as mother since their reproductive capacity is crucial to the maintenance of husband’s lineage and it is because of women that man can have a patrilineal at all . The importance of motherhood and the evaluation of the childbearing capacity by African woman and her western counterparts in their common struggle to end discrimination against women (1981: 1-41243)

Conclusion: Blind imitation of Feminism , may be the common fashion for educated , black women in the cities . . But their rural counter parts , wish to make best of both the worlds: rural and modern !!! Because they are conditioned to respect the Igbo cosmology which doesn’t believe in husband -bashing in order to maintain one’s socio-political rights, but originally , offer equal space for man and woman to co- exist ,peacefully. In the drama , city women are totally ignorant about this fact . Their ignorance about their own culture make them ill equipped to inspire or become role model for their rural counterparts who initially succumb to sweet talk of sisterhoods an emancipation ; however they are disappointed to face ill treatments at the hands of their own sister .This real life tragedy of African woman is, skillfully portrayed by Tess Onwueme, through the women characters.

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