

TESS ONWUEME'S *TELL IT TO WOMEN*: A MODERN TALE OF INTRA-GENDER CONFLICTS AMONG AFRICAN WOMEN

MRINALINI B CHAVAN

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 counterpart. 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 to part away with it.

Keywords: De-womanization, Dual sex system, Motherhood.

Introduction: Tess Onwueme belongs to Igbo community in Nigeria and she is one of the leading Nigerian female dramatists who writes women centric plays. Eugene B Redmond calls her 'an African - Nigerian - Igbo - woman - feminist - artist' (Onwueme 16). Her plays, strictly, reflect critical perspective of post colonial Nigerian women on corrupt socio-political system. Tess Onwueme's play, *Tell It to Women* depicts the intra-gender clashes between the rural women and city counterpart. It focuses on the Igbo cosmology and the futility behind applying the westernised notion of feminism for the upliftment of African women. The dramatist deliberately portrays her women characters as socio-politically conscious figures. These female characters fight, frenziedly against the exploitative agencies in order to find the solution to the problems they face in their immediate environment. Dramatist Tess Onwueme claims to perceive theatre as a group medium for dialogue in the society as she is influenced by the Bertolt Brecht theatre ideology "where the people are challenged to look critically at their situation and compelled to want to change it." (Uko 43). In an interview, Tess Onwueme states: 'We live in a society where women have it hard. Their lives are manipulated by others' (Uko 271)

In this paper we propose to have critical overview of the dramatist's treatment of the question of the rural African Igbo woman's position and identity in a society which deprives her of socio-political rights when her city counterparts turn out to be the new exploitative masters. The paper analyses prominent female characters from the drama, *Tell it women*, and attempts are made to study the strategies they follow in order to assert the importance of their Igbo cosmology and thereby solve their socio-cultural

conflict. Although the discussion treats the topics separately, in the dramas, they are integrated as a part of the organic whole. Through out the paper, *Tell It to Women* is abbreviated as *TTW*.

In the drama, *Tell It to Women*, Tess Onwueme, brings the light upon the intra-gender conflicts 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, the city women are fortunate enough to have access to western education and as a result they are holding higher positions as professors, officers etc. In the drama, Daisy holds a government post; though married, she 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 to Idu rural women. 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* 47); since it guarantees rural women access to electricity, air conditioner, refrigerator, gas cooker etc. Rural women, too, want to benefit out of this program and wish to "long for stars..." (*TTW* 29). Molar Ogundipe-Leslie posits out that rural women want 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 woman 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.

Motherhood: The intra-gender clashes between rural and city women take place because of the cultural differences among both the parties. For instance, Adaku is angry to find, ignorant Daisy and Ruth use English to explain the government scheme to rural women than speaking in indigenous tongue. Further, Ruth read out readymade speech in English which shows she lacks spontaneity to connect with rural women. Ruth hardly cares when Yamoja fails to translate her heavy and fast English in indigenous tongue for rural women. Ignorant about Igbo cosmology, Daisy in her speech asks rural women to follow the western radical feminist notions to progress in their lives and insists in her speech "... (to) leave husband and go to school...(your) lives can be fulfilled outside motherhood ...Mothering should be matter of choice" (TTW 48). Ruth, too talks of taking power from men and giving it to women. Daisy and Ruth both fail to understand the fact that their that the western notion of feminism is not at all suitable in the African rural socio-political situation. Rural women disagree with 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..", since woman is in a position to, "create and carry another life", unlike men who are, "outsiders in the process of giving birth" (TTW 36). 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 36) 161). Adaku further stresses the fact that there is no need to snatch away power from men and give it to women since Idu women, already have power and they are, in fact badly in need of another power i.e "power of money" (TTW 37). 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. and she further adds: "Modern women burn their men, bury them alive! And they think this is what give them power" (TTW 166). Tolu criticises modern women for 'brandishing a pen and using it to poke the eyes and the faces of men' (TTW 177) and calls these women underdeveloped and illiterate for 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 _____"

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 the 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... 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 whereat 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)

Daisy is obsessed with the western notion of feminism. Daisy's husband ridicules her for replacing "bookish sense of wisdom" with the "common sense" and asks her to know about her own people and their culture before joining the "feminist bandwagon" (TTW 92.) Okie further informs Daisy that the binary logic of Either/OR is not applicable in the Idu world/Igbo Cosmology: "(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)

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" (Nnaemeka 1998), quotes Sudarkasa, Niara to comments on *de-womanization* of African womanhood who blame sArab an dEuropean male cntric social set up to take away socio-political freedom of African women and reducing her to inferior social element

...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 ... Gradually she grew to be irrelevant, ineffective radiant and dull..'(1987: 25-42)

The urban women, despite, education and exposure look down upon the rural women. Chosen by Idu village, Yamoja, considers it as a golden opportunity to carve her own identity, and ultimately guide her fellow women. In fact she fights against her husband and parents to join Ruth and Daisy. Ironically, Daisy and Ruth both look down upon Yemoja because she is just another rural woman for them. Daisy perceives Yemoja, just another 31 years of maids and 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'. Yamoja is supposed to follow few rules 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 for other family members and not Yamoja.

Daisy's constant 'dressing down' breaks Yamoja's confidence.. Yemoja's dreams of 'strength in sisterhood', 'oneness', and 'equality of men and women' are shattered and she feels disconnected to herself like a 'newly relocated hen'(TTW 98). She loses her pride, self esteem and concludes "...the city takes away the power of women." (TTW 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, in real sense 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 /ideology: "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).

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"(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). 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 realizes that the urban as well as the rural worlds have so many things to exchange and 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:

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 of the land ...But they say you lack power ...Earth is women. Woman is power ...

Rural women know when "Times are hard and treacherous..". (TTW 184); they need to be strong. The female characters Sherifat, Tolue Ajaka and Yamoja drum for women to express their strength. Their drumming echoes the real strength of sisterhood. In the last scene of the drama, they change the performance into their New Yam festival and enact the appropriate ritual drumming rather than doing some artificial marching.

Conclusion: In the drama, modern educated city women fail to understand the value of Igbo cosmology. They turned out to be totally ignorant about the bonding and the interrelation between rural women's lives and importance of Igbo cosmology. By rejecting the western ideology of feminism, rural women foil the plot of their city counterpart to exploit them for own personal interest. Thus, ultimately, rural women prefer to dance on their own tune than copying the western

ideologies propagated by their city counterpart. It is very important that the women of both world, privileged group, so called in modern sense and, other group that looks up to modern women but still hesitant to completely discard the ideology which they believed in: both parties need to find a golden mean !!! Unless each group offering respect to their respective ideologies, such union is impossible.

References:

1. Davis, Carlos. "Motherhood in the works of Male and Female Igbo Writers: Achebe, Emecheta, Nwapa and Nzekwu". In *Nagambika Studies of Women In African Literature*, ed; Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adam Graves. New Jersey: African World Press 1986. Print
2. Hudson - Wheems, Clenora. "African Womanism". In *Sisterhood Feminism & Power*
3. *From Africa to the Diaspora* ed Nnaemeka, Obioma, New Jersey: African World Press 1998. Print
4. Nnaemeka, Obioma, ed. "Reading the Rainbow" In *Sisterhood Feminism & Power From Africa to the Diaspora* New Jersey, African World Press 1998. Print
5. *Africa to the Diaspora* New Jersey, African World Press 1998. Print
6. Onwueke, Tess. *Tell It To Women* Nigeria: Wyan State University Press 1997. Print
7. *Emerging Perspective on Flora Nwapa: Critical and theoretical Essays* ed. Marrie. Umeth Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press 1998. Print.
8. Sofala, Zulu "Feminism And Africa Womanhood". In *Sisterhood Feminism & Power From Africa to the Diaspora* ed Nnaemeka, Obioma. New Jersey, African World Press 1998. Print
9. Uko, Iniobong. *Gender & Identity in the works of Osonye Tess Onwueke* Nigeria: African World Press, 2004. Print.

Prof. Mrinalini B Chavan./Assistant Prof /Department of English/
Kirti M Doongursee College /University Of Mumbai /Mumbai .MS.India
mrinalnihc@rediffmail.com/09619789619