

Female Heroism and the Feminist Discourse in Wale Ogunyemi's *Queen Amina* and Irene Agunloye's *Emotan*

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Abstract

Drama in 21st century Nigeria no doubt has embraced the feminist discourse. Issues of womanhood and the place of the African woman in a rapidly changing world have occupied a firm position on the Nigerian stage. This paper is a study of the works and ideological framework of two notable Nigerian playwrights – Wale Ogunyemi and Irene Agunloye in the context of renegotiating the womanhood question in Nigeria's contemporary socio-political and economic life. The study is a critical overview of the plays – *Emotan* by Irene Agunloye and *Queen Amina* by Wale Ogunyemi with the objective of exploring and bringing out the context from which the plays approach the subject of feminism and gender issues. This comparative study addresses the highly contestable cultural construct of Africa in the global feminine quest to rewrite and consequently realign the stereotypical images of women in Africa. It concludes that Africa's path in the feminist agenda is dichotomous to the mainstream feminist movement of the West as women in Africa urgently seek a fair representation in its leadership. For this to happen, the African woman needs to go to the past and seek inspiration from her legendary folks who courageously stepped up and changed the course of history and their society.

Keywords: Drama, Gender, Heroism, Feminism, Patriarchy

Introduction

The gender question has occupied the front burners of intellectual discourse in recent times. In almost all facets of human society, the subsidiarization of the female gender has not escaped any serious contemporary social discourse. From the social sciences to arts, women and gender studies is a subject that has taken centre-stage. This new norm has deeply permeated the field of drama and the performing arts. Dramatists of repute in the last three decades have used their art in not just exposing the plight of women in a highly patriarchal society but also in creating a new norm and breaking the second-class stereotype that has trailed the feminine gender in Africa. Male and female writers alike have deployed legendary female figures whose heroic acts have reshaped society's history and whose memory have remained an inspiration that have driven the feminist's course across Africa. This paper, therefore, seeks to x-ray the use of these female legends in contemporary Nigerian drama and how this trend serves not just a social aesthetic function but also the gender discourse especially for the arts. Drama is a medium of artistic expression where all aspects of human experiences are mirrored in a dynamic, living form. A metaphorical image of reality, it reflects total cosmic, moral and metaphysical order of the life of the people (Clay and Krempel, 1985). However, drama does not just reflect but mediates life. Williams (1977) says art does not only mediate, but it is also a sieve. Drama is an arena where human beings are presented in a cosmic totality, acting and reacting to forces around them and within them, perceiving and being perceived by those interacting with them, and by those in the audience who experience with them the enigma that is common of humanity. Human beings possess a consciousness that propels them into involvement in a universe bigger than themselves, as they restlessly question their own reality, the meaning of existence, and the forces that seem to manipulate them and the universe. According to Soyinka (1975):

The drama of life is in a fluid and dynamic form for the purpose of binding, cleansing, rejuvenating and communicating the communal, moral and cosmic order for the edification of the human soul and the elevation of its intellectual well-being.

Over the last three decades, the typology of female characters presented in African drama has gone through several metamorphoses. With the advent of feminism in Nigeria, the re-enactment of female historical figures has been done to reflect the realities in discourse and context.

This study takes an overview of two notable female dramatists to bring out the various trends in both female characterisations particularly with the nation's female legends in view. This is done to also reflect the contemporary theories inherent in their works.

A Brief Overview of Female Historical Figures in Nigeria's History

According to Ityavyar and Ityavyar (2002), the history of the participation of Nigerian women in leadership dates back to the pre-colonial period. The geopolitical region now called Nigeria had famous and powerful kingdoms and empires some of which were ruled and controlled by women. Sweetman (1992) in his documentary of the political influence of Nigerian women in pre-colonial period mentioned particularly Queen Amina of Zaria in the 16th century. While stories about her could be legends, scholars believe she was an actual person who ruled in what is now the Zaria province of Nigeria. Oral tradition includes many stories about Amina of Zazzau, but scholars also generally accept that the stories are based on a real person who ruled Zazzau (now known as Zaria). The dates of Amina's life and rule though still shrouded in uncertainties, scholars still place her in the 15th century or the 16th. Amina was known as a warrior queen who extended the territory of her people.

History has it that Amina's mother, Bakwa of Turunku, was the founding ruler of Zazzau as a kingdom, one of many Hausa city-kingdoms involved in trade. The collapse of the Songhai empire left a gap in power that these city-states filled. Amina, born in the city of Zazzau was trained in skills of government and military warfare and fought in battles with her brother, Karama. In 1566, when Bakwa died, Amina's younger brother Karama became king. In 1576, when Karama died, Amina, now about 43, became Queen of Zazzau. She used her military prowess to expand the territory of Zazzau to the mouth of the Niger in the south including Kano and Katsina to the north. Lewis (2020) notes that these military feats and conquests became a source of wealth as they opened more trading routes and had tributes paid to Zazzau by annexed territories.

What appears to be a more accurate and definitive anthology of Queen Amina is captured in Potholm (2021)'s work which states thus:

Amina of Hausaland (1533-1610) was an African Muslim leader who defied a wide variety of conventions - male dominance, existing Islamic hierarchies, and African traditions - all of which militated against her success, yet she would go on to conquer much of north central Africa. She ruled Northern Nigeria, with a capital at Zaria, south of what is now Kano. Born into the ruling house of Zazzau, she took the throne in about 1576. She reportedly refused all suitors and led her armies, fighting for 34 years and presiding over a great expansion of trade. Under her rule, the Hausa language became the language of trade.

Amina is also credited with building walls around her camps during her military ventures, and with building a wall around the city of Zaria, part of which still stands till date around the Zaria old city. She is also noted for cultivation of kola nuts. She never got married and had no children either. Legends tell of her taking, after a battle, a man from among the enemy, and

spending the night with him, then killing him in the morning so he could tell no stories. Amina ruled for 34 years before her death. According to legends, she was killed in a military campaign near Bida, Nigeria.

The second heroine figure of this paper is Uvwi Emotan, a politician and diplomat of the Benin Kingdom. Originally named Uwaraye, she was born in Eyaen, the present day Oduwawa Cattle Market area on the Benin-Auchi road, between 1380 and 1400. She was a market trader who sold foodstuff during the 15th century at the Oba Market in the ancient Benin Kingdom, during the reign of Oba Uwaifiokun and Prince Ogun, who was later referred to as 'Oba Ewuare the Great' after he became the king of Benin. Emotan was the pioneer of the first Daycare in Benin city. Shortly after the death of her husband, she built a hut where she selflessly attended to the health and needs of children belonging to families patronising the market, without charges for her service. It was therefore in her nature to help Prince Ogun (Oba Ewuare) get his throne back from his brother, Uwaifiokun.

Oba Ewuare was a great king, leader and warrior whose exploits still resound in Edo history. As a result, he had many enemies, one of which was Uwaifiokun. Based on oral history, Emotan is known to have helped Oba Ewuare reclaim the throne as Oba of Benin after several years in exile. She played a vital role by informing him of a murder plot against him by Oba Uwaifiokun and some chiefs, and also joined to protect him from being killed. After his reinstatement, he immediately appointed Emotan as the Iyeki, which means the leader of the authorized Ekpate guild; a position that enabled her to enforce market rules and checkmate issues regarding market security.

Due to her many impacts, Emotan was deified by Oba Ewuare after her death. He accomplished this by ordering the planting of the sacred Uruhe tree at the market spot where she displays her wares. The Oba went on to make a decree that persons having any form of occasions requiring a ceremonial gathering must pay homage to Emotan. She was worshipped as the mother of love and kindness.

Other female legends include Idia Esigie who through her political prowess successfully fought to restore her son as the Oba of Benin. She also maintained a powerful court and had a fierce army that took part in battles. Oba Orompo reigned from 1555 and is the only known female Oba in Yoruba land. She was an influential figure who restored dignity, peace and stability in Oyo Kingdom.

Princess Moremi who lived in the second half of the sixteenth century earned herself a political position in Ile-Ife through her solid personal achievements. Madam Tinubu lived from 1830 – 1887 and was a seasoned political stalwart who used her political weight to support Akintoye, the rightful king of Lagos, over his feud with Kosoko and helped in reinstating him to the throne instead of Kosoko. She actively played a role in the resistance to British rule in Nigeria. Obuma Archibong was the political head of Calabar in the middle 19th century. She developed sophisticated political strategies to protect Calabar from colonial invasion.

In the 1860s, Ojedi Undei emerged as a powerful leader of the Igalas. She was a formidable force to reckon with during the European invasion of Igalala. We have witnessed this trend of powerful women up to the colonial period. Mention must be made of women like Alimotu Obasa, Olukoye Ramsome Kuti and Hajia Gambo Sawaba.

These historical female figures particularly those who achieved heroic feats have been represented in African dramatic literature by both female and male writers. Within these works are the portrayal of huge ideological constructs mostly feminine in nature. In a century where the feminist question has been on the front burner of contemporary social discourses,

issues of womanhood cannot be ignored especially when critical interrogation is made through the works of Wale Ogunyemi and Irene Agunloye.

The Feminist Question in African Drama

Heroism and heroic acts have trailed human existence all through history and even prehistoric times. Human anthology has always chronicled great feats and deeds by exceptional beings and these pre-dates human civilization. Kinsella, Ritchie & Igou (2017) define heroism as that which typically involves greater levels of risk and self-reliance.

Unlike altruism, health benefits are rarely associated with heroism due to the high levels of personal sacrifice involved. Heroes choose a challenging particular course of action even when it may be psychologically easier to exit the situation.

Making a cursory study through classical antiquity, Kohen (2014) states that the battlefield hero considers two possible realities; the necessity of death and the decision to take a heroic action. Drawing example from Homer's *Achilles*, Kohen (2014) notes that:

While it might seem counter-intuitive that recognizing one's mortality could lead to actions that result more immediately in death, I agree that it is only recognizing the limits of our existence that we can open up a space for heroic behaviour.

One pertinent question here is that overtime, literature and particularly literary drama is replete with many male heroes and there is a dominant presence as well as celebration of heroic men especially in African literature to the detriment of their female counterparts. There is no doubt that the African soil has seen and witnessed a modest contribution of female heroic figures in most Nigerian communities. Women have indeed written their names in the sands of time and their feats have been immortalized. Deme (2010) attributes this academic bias especially by western scholars.

The lack of the portrayal of women as the true heroines in African oral literature undoubtedly emanates from the bias that western scholars as well as African ones have had about women and their roles in African societies... There is thus, a need to move from the portrayal of women as passive, docile and marginal, to a depiction of women as the active, dynamic, positive and indispensable protagonists that they have always been in African societies.

This informs the need to examine the engagement of African literary drama to the discourse of heroism and the contributions of real female historical figures to the survival and development of their societies. This is however, without prejudice to the sacrifices they have made, sometimes putting their lives on the line to sustain their communities.

Feminism or the feminist movement actually began in the socially active atmosphere of the late 1960s and 1970s. Wilson defines feminism as a movement, "which stressed consciousness-raising to make people aware of the secondary position women had too often been forced to occupy in social and political structures" (Wilson, 1998). He continues that activists who can also be called feminists of this period, attempted to revise cultural value systems and interpersonal relations in terms of an egalitarian ideology. From this universal worldview of feminism, Africa takes a seemingly different path to reflect its own social realities. This is more so as the continent is one with deep rooted cultures and a set of value systems through which peace, stability and social cohesion is maintained.

African feminism or what may be called "womanism" concerns itself with rediscovering the African woman lost in the trenches of Western imperialist ideas. Mikell says African feminism should not be concerned with issues such as female control over

reproduction or variation and choice within human sexuality, nor with derived essentialism, the female body, or the discourse of patriarchy. “Feminism that is slowly emerging in Africa is distinctly heterogeneous, pronatal and concerned with ‘bread, butter and power issues’” (134).

Thus, the drama of Wale Ogunyemi and Irene Agunloye has captured and worked within the territories of African feminist ideologies. The re-enactment of female historical figures in their works depicts the struggle of the African woman for a society where justice, peace and equity can be guaranteed. The African woman faces contestations arising from bad leadership which engenders economic hardship from which women are badly hit. Figures like Moremi, Emotan and Queen Amina were inspired to achieve legendary feats not for their own self-glory but for the sake of women in their communities. From simple reasons as letting their voices be heard to engaging the men folk, they laid down their lives and the results were quite revolutionary.

The Discourse of Heroism in Wale Ogunyemi’s *Queen Amina*

Although, Wale Ogunyemi may not be equated with any feminist contraption, his play - *Queen Amina* historicizes the cultural situation which subjects women to patriarchal control that is deemed normal. His heroic figure is the woman next door, the widow, the housewife, the market woman, the kitchen woman, the child bearer and all other stereotypical images the African enclave has made of women. In *Queen Amina*, Ogunyemi goes back into history to bring out the extraordinary strength of a woman against the seeming defeatist disposition of the African woman in the wake of many harmful traditional practices that have been meted to the female gender. The play *Queen Amina* itself is about a fierce, virtuous, courageous and beautiful queen. Queen Amina was born brave and from a tender age, she has learnt the art of craftsmanship and military tactics. The kingdom of Zazzau was threatened by the great Kukubuwa snake. Women, children and men were killed by this spirit and this became a source of concern to Bakwa, Amina’s mother. Pressured to bring a husband home, she goes to the Priest for consultation. She was made to choose her fate from three calabashes and her lot fell on the praying mantis. The import of this would be that her lust for men will be insatiable but yet she would be a woman of immense strength and courage. However, the day she shares her bed with a man and afterwards the man goes ahead to share his bed with another woman, her power and authority will begin to wane and the consequences would be disastrous especially if the man lives and freely walks the earth.

After this, Amina went ahead to fight the great Kukubuwa snake and defeated it. Thereafter she received the news of her mother’s death due to anxiety and worry. Amina was crowned queen and ruled Zazzau excellently. She fought many battles and won, never took a husband but had been with many men who didn’t live to tell the tale. The only person who knew about this secret was Mairo, one of Amina’s slaves who was deeply in love with Aliyu, a soldier. When Queen Amina decided to lay with Aliyu, Mairo betrayed Queen Amina by giving Aliyu the antidote to her poison. When Queen Amina discovered this, she confronted and poisoned Mairo after which she went to look for Aliyu who had escaped to another town after deflowering Mairo. Amina was hell-bent on taking down Aliyu despite several warnings of the consequences and this led to her death.

The character of Queen Amina breaks the stereotype of womanhood especially in Northern Nigeria. The larger-than-life persona of this flirtatious but courageous queen does not resonate with the contemporary Hausa woman. In the Priest’s words typifying her unique and strange attributes, he states:

Priest: While all girls were attached to their mothers or grandmothers, thereby acquiring the skills usually associated with that sex, Amina attached herself to her grandfather, and by identifying herself with the court, began to acquire different skills normally unexpected of girls (34).

One of the strongest statements in the play that represents the main crux of the feminist discourse is in the words Queen Amina and states thus:

Amina: A woman should not be a pawn in the hands of any man. They say people do it, so you too must follow. I beg to differ. A woman should be left to choose a path best suited to her existence and not be ostracised from the society which she loves (36).

The Feminist Quest in Irene Agunloye's *Emotan*

What can be described as indeed revolutionary came with the drama of Irene Agunloye. In her two historical plays *Emotan* and *Queen Sisters* based on the story and myth of the old Benin kingdom, she re-writes and reconstructs the story of women as told by the men. In *Emotan*, there is a depiction of the feat achieved by a woman in her bid to restore legitimacy, fair-play, justice and economic empowerment for women. This play typifies the truth that when justice prevails, war is averted and women and children who are the victims can live in peace. The story of *Emotan* as told by Agunloye is quite synonymous with the legendary of Moremi – women with the heart of men, who are willing to lay down their lives so that their kingdom can have peace. Similar traits are found in Queen Amina of Zaria. This play takes the discourse of feminism further to the realm of liberation. In this play, the women can assert their rights and engage in full political activities without necessarily getting the endorsement of the men folk – that is if they are willing to pay the price. The story of *Emotan* as told by the playwright showcases the contribution of women to Nigeria's political history. In the preface to the play, Agunloye writes that despite the great contribution of women to the development and growth of ancient Benin Kingdom:

it is surprising that they were mentioned only in passing. At other times, they were not mentioned at all. Men have always written history and prefer to write their own stories. Writing *Emotan* is my contribution to the effort to celebrate women's achievements in 'history' books (Salami, 2001 : iv).

In the midst of the hegemony that pervades the entire ancient Benin kingdom, *Emotan* achieved heroic feats; she dared the paths most men were unwilling to take. She empowered her fellow women folk by bringing them to the market thereby making them self-sufficient. In her conversation with Okutukutu on whether she is willing to pay the price for *Ogun* to gain his throne, she replies;

O wicked and treacherous world! What can I do now? What choice do I have? I have always lived my life for humanity, for Benin and for Ogun. But now having to die for the throne of Benin to be rid of injustice and treachery is a different thing entirely. It is not something I bargained for.. I will lay down my life for the throne of Benin (45).

All through history, records abound of heroic acts of women in the quest to salvage their communities from annihilation. These feats have provided rich narratives that express the uniqueness of African feminist ideology. Drama has also engaged these ideals and provided parameters for a better appreciation of the contribution of African women to the leadership across Africa.

Conclusion

Wale Ogunyemi and Irene Agunloye are different paths in grafting the history of women in Africa. A review of their works through this study shows that the woman question in the historiography of most African communities cannot be thrown overboard. They have suffered, they have endured, they have fought and they have won costly battles in their quest for justice. In Ogunyemi, the heroine is mirrored in the struggle with the contraption's society has placed on her and how she was able to break these contraptions with the exploits of a queen who dared the path most men feared and conquered. The heroism of Amina and attributes may not be in sync with the present realities of women in Africa today, yet the play brings to the front burner a twist to the feminist cause in the Third World and that is a women ought to step up and fight for power rather than wait for power to be brought to them by the men. In Agunloye, there is the determination, the dexterity and the rare sacrifice the woman is willing to make to change situations and re-write history – a history hitherto dominated by men. These re-enactments perhaps will continue to form the fulcrum of the woman question and the discourse of feminism for the now and in the future.

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