

Stella Oyedepo and the Feminist Vision in the Rebellion of the Bumpy-chested

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I. INTRODUCTION

Stella Oyedepo is arguably one of the most visible practitioners of theatre in Nigeria today. The corpus of her plays, both published and unpublished establishes her as one of the most prolific playwrights to have emerged in Nigeria. She has published over twenty plays which include: Survive, We Will, The Missing Ingredient, The Saga of Rescue, Beyond the Dark Tunnel, Brain Has No Gender, The Wife's Fury, Our Wife is not a Woman, On His Demise, and Burn the Fetters amongst others. Her drama deals with issues in Nigeria, a country bedeviled with multifaceted ills. In her view, Nigeria is a country with perverted and misplaced social values. Oyedepo is a feminist who through her drama has also spoken against sexual injustice meted out on women in society and has proffered educational empowerment of women to redress their marginalization. This paper will analyze The Rebellion of the Bumpy-chested in order to foreground Stella Oyedepo's feminist vision in the play.

SYNOPSIS AND ANALYSIS OF THE REBELLION OF THE BUMPY-CHESTED

The play parades a club of highly impressionable women led by an overbearing and frustrated male hater, Captain Sharp, in a revolt against their husbands under the guise of feminism. Apart from dressing in an unlady-like manner, abandoning their children and fighting their husbands physically and verbally, the women also carry out tasks hitherto performed by men such as palm wine tapping, as Rebecca has done, taxi-driving, as Salwa has done. As Akin is arguing with his wife on her newfound career as taxi driver, Akanbi, his friend, arrives dressed in female attire and carrying his baby on his back as women usually do. In addition he has a bowl of rice on his head. Akin also dresses up in women's attire and both men are about to go out. Salwa feels so nauseated that she almost goes mad with disgust. Her feeling this way spells doom for the BCM struggle. Shortly after she queries her friend Tara, "How best can a woman fight a man? How best can the war of the sexes be waged without the woman being the sufferer or the loser?. This is clear evidence that the insurgent women have been caught in their own trap and their struggle has been torpedoed.

The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested is a play that is founded on the idea of revolt. It is a rebellion by women in solidarity against male domination. Rebellion is adopted by the women in addressing the perceived sexual injustices and rapacity in the society. The women refused to be ensconced in the maelstrom of patriarchy. In this respect, the play resonates Marsha Norman's *Getting Out*: "not only does it focus on woman's struggle for self-determination in the face of powerful patriarchal forces; it documents the social construction of gender" or a dramatization of a woman's tragedy such as we find in Jessie's in *Night Mother* by Marsha Norman, in a culture accustomed to valorizing male action as a bold move."

Under the aegis of the Bumpy-Chested Movement (B.C.M) led by Captain Sharp who is "beefy, with a stentorian voice and a grim visage" (2), the women rebel against perceived injustices against them. Other vibrant members of the group who demonstrate extreme case of revolt include: Falilat, Ashake, Salwa, Sabina, Tara, among others. In their rebellion, they embark on kitchen and bed strike against their husbands who are the custodians of patriarchalism. In this vein, *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested* shares thematic affinity with plays such as Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, J.P.Clark's *The Wives Revolt* among others.

The main gender issues addressed in the play are: The basis of bride wealth or bride price; the respect accorded a woman whether married or unmarried and the domestic roles of a woman defined by men. These issues are succinctly articulated by Captain Sharp, the feminist voice of the playwright. In her articulation of the feminist manifesto which appears in part five of the play, she posits that, Now, the synopsis of the women's demand is this. We want equal opportunity with men. This means for example that the society should remove the prejudices which prevent women from getting into the highest positions like Heads of State, Governors, Vice-Chancellors and a lot of other top ranking positions including high spiritual offices like that of the Pope or the Sheik (73-74)

This view is supported by Alexandra Kollontai when she says that "women can become truly free and equal only in a world organized along new social and productive lines..." (176). The thrust of the women's rebellion therefore is to extricate women from a life-long domestic imprisonment. They also want to assert themselves as humans capable of aspiring to any social position. The play challenges institutionalized male monopoly of leadership in political spheres and the need to reverse this trend. The women also debunk long-held

patriarchal beliefs of the woman as intoned by Akanbi who believes that “power is not a property to be found in a woman” (40). This debased state of women in the play forcefully recalls John Winkler’s observation that “Women in a male-prominent society are thus like a linguistic minority in a culture whose public actions are all conducted in the majority language.” (585) Jolomi, the husband of Falilat, one of the vociferous members of the B.C.M, also believes that: “Women are better than heard just like a rope does not befit a fowl’s neck, a position of authority does not befit a woman. It mars her femininity.” (32) They are as Luce Irigaray attests to “physical containers which have their value as exchange within patriarchal economic and symbolic structures”

Jolomi’s view of women echoes the atavistic views of Rousseau and Aristotle of ancient memory who prescribe the confinement of women to a life of domesticity. Another scene where patriarchal arrogance is unveiled in the play is in the dialogue between Ashake and her brothers-in-law, Clem and James who are in their teens.

Clem: (Sorely) Ashake, I say you have no right...no authority whatsoever to lock that fridge up! It was bought by my brother’s hard earned money.

Ashake: (jeeringly) for how much?

James: (Taken aback) whatever that implies?

Clem: That we got you cheaper than the fridge and for that simple reason, you can’t wield your power over what has a higher price than you.

Clem and James try to reduce woman to a mere property. This view coheres with Simon de Beauvoir’s observation that “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself, but as a relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being”, and this is because “woman has always been man’s dependent if not his slave. The two sexes have never shared the world in equality” (qtd in Okoh 81). It is because of these perceived indifference towards women that, according to Sharp, the B.C.M “aims at the emancipation of women from the oppressive domination of the men” (73). She therefore vows to attack this patriarchal order that creates gender imbalance between the sexes. In her words,

This existing order must be blown into billions of infinitesimal fragments. A new order must emerge. This life of drudgery to which women have been sentenced throughout the ages must alter for a better one. Men should be asked to descend from the Olympian heights in which they have carved an exclusive niche and shake hands with women on the platform of equality. Women must emerge from a state of submissiveness to that of parity if not dominance. (16-17)

In order to actualize her goal, Sharp undertakes an indoctrination of the other female rebels in the play, who effect the ideology of revolt in their homes. For instance, Falilat and Tara batter their husbands in their respective homes. Ashake starves her brothers-in-law of food. This feeling of indoctrination also spurs women to assert themselves and to believe that roles are not defined either for the man or the woman. Sabina and Salwa engage in transvestism, they veer into male dominated professions of palm-wine tapping and taxi-driving respectively. In *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-chested*, Salwa’s song, a popular trade union protest song conveys the collective resolve of the women in their rebellion:

(Starts a song) We no gree o

We no go gree

B.C.M members

We no gree

(all sing with pugnacious force making wild movements)

In another instance, they sing a solidarity song:

All we are saying,

Suffering must stop!

All we are saying,

Give us a chance!

All we are saying,

We are no slaves! (17)

The feminist message of the playwright is succinctly articulated in the song of the women in part six of the play: (Taking up the song)

What a man can do

A woman can do

What a man can do

A woman can do

Tell them... tell them... tell them.

We are here
Members of B.C.M
To fight for our rights
Emancipation is our watch-word
Freedom is our goal
We are here
Members of B.C.M
To fight for our rights. (82-3)

The vibrancy of the B.C.M, which hitherto had recorded victories for women, becomes dampened with the role-reversal acts of Akanbi and Jolomi who dress like women, the latter with a baby swaddled on his back, hawking rice. The effectiveness of this act is graphically captured by Chris Dunton:

most effective of all is the last scene, in which two of the husbands enter into role-reversal, the first borrowing his wife's clothes, making himself as pretty as possible, the second entering with a child strapped to his back, revealing he is making a successful living as a rice-seller...what makes this startling and theatrically daring is the sense that these men are not involved in travesty, that they are not putting on some kind of retributive parody; rather, as they enthusiastically discuss child-raising and prospects in the food-selling business, they are genuinely undergoing some change in their allotted roles. (106)

This act mesmerizes Salwa and Tara who become pessimistic of the potency of the rebellion in achieving equality with men. In Salwa's words, "How best can a woman fight a man? How best can the war of the sexes be waged without the woman being the sufferer?" (94). The answer seems to lie in true love between the sexes. A critical analysis of the last moments of the play makes one to agree, in the main, with Chris Dunton when he says:

The final moments of the play remain open-ended as two of the women, Salwa and Tara, discuss the struggle, first agreeing that equality is perhaps an unrealistic goal and that the confidence of the B.C.M is hubristic; then recognizing the primacy of true love in human relations, finally, however, agreeing that, if not the struggle precisely as defined by the B.C.M., then the struggle to identify new and far more just ways of organizing relations between men and women must continue. (107)

His disposition is supported by Simone de Beauvoir:

It is for man to establish the reign of liberty in the midst of the world of the given. To gain supreme victory, it is necessary, for one thing, that by and through their natural differentiation, men and women unequivocally affirm their brotherhood (qtd in Achufusi 105)

It is however necessary to posit that the confidence displayed by the B.C.M in the words of Dunton is not hubristic. It is confidence arising from the pain of subordination by existing patriarchal paradigms in society. A major weakness in *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-chested* is the climate of irresolution which betrays lack of a clear feminist stance. The play appears to be only tangentially informed by a feminist agenda. The dramatic form seems to reinforce the status quo. The world of the play however depicts the culture as supercilious to the plight of women. Despite the perceived setbacks in the play, the women rebels under the able leadership of Captain Sharp have succeeded in exteriorizing the patriarchal values and beliefs which conspire to disempower women in their efforts at self-determination and self-fulfillment. They have also risen up boldly to attack the male embodiments of this belief as deducible from the analysis of the play. The probable reasons why the rebellion crumbled were two-fold; the uncertain and unreliable leadership of Captain Sharp and the fact that the rebellion did not receive the support of men in the task of building a new invigorated society.

Oyedepo does not seem to support the rabid radical feminism espoused by her feminist character— Captain Sharp. She obviously does not see the need to break down the social structure before women can exercise their right to contribute in the society. She is rather favourably inclined to the tenets of African feminism which advocates complementarity between the sexes for a more harmonious existence and for social development. To her, feminism is not the reversal of roles. Her view is supported by Nnaemeka who articulates the basic ingredients of African feminism to be "power sharing, complementarity, accommodation, compromise, negotiation, and inclusiveness". This view coheres with Filomina Steady's view expressed in her article, "African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective". In it, she opines that sexual differences and similarities should be appreciated because the male is not seen by the woman as the "other" rather as part of the human same; thus each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole (12). African feminism, according to Steady, fosters parallel autonomy, communalism and cooperation for the preservation of life rather than the frameworks of dichotomy, individualism, competition and opposition, identifiable with Western feminism (97). African feminist literary criticism is pro-nationalist and pro-socialist. It affirms the value of women's status as mothers and even as polygynous co-wives. African feminism does not intend to replace male hegemony with female domination. It advocates complementarity, as has already been mentioned, between the sexes. The primary objective of African feminism is that it enlists the support of men in eradicating retrogressive cultural

practices that affect women. According to Catherine Acholonu, it is a feminism which advocates “love, tolerance, service and mutual cooperation for the sexes, not antagonism, aggression, militancy or critical confrontation plus protection and defense of family values” (qtd in Nnolim 218) It therefore is not surprising that the feminist ideals espoused by Captain Sharp are nipped in the bud in line with Oyedepo’s African feminist leaning.

II. CONCLUSION

The play addresses key gender issues such as bride wealth and basically challenges institutionalized male monopoly of leadership in political spheres and the need to reverse this trend. As an African feminist guided by its basic tenets, Stella Oyedepo believes that the liberation of men is a necessary condition in redressing the marginalization of women. She is of the unswerving view that rabid radical feminism in the Nigerian cultural context will not be able to ameliorate the denigrating status of women in society. This view she has demonstrated in *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-chested*. She therefore advances complementarity as the panacea for socio-politico-economic transformation through the world of play.

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