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Advocacy for Women Empowerment in Irene Salami-Agunloye's *The Queen Sisters*.

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Abstract

*The issue of women being dominated by men is not new as the two have co-existed in this manner since creation and co-exist even in the 21st century. However, with the advent of civilization manifested in western education and philosophies, women have been liberated from the dominant hold of men. Women make their marks in all areas of human live including academics where they are in the fore front of this liberation theology; the fact that some of them fall victims of their own philosophies notwithstanding. The theory and practice of women liberation is better experienced in the home where the realities of life are first revealed. Drama is a very good medium of life dramatization where a graphic picture is clearly presented. To comprehend the issue and argument inherent in the women liberation struggle, *The Queen Sisters* by Irene Salami-Agunloye will be used. The chapter submits that the play itself is the beginning of the process of realization of the ideals of equality with men. It may take time but with concerted efforts and unity of the women folk this aspiration stands surmountable as it is obtained in the western world.*

Introduction

Tradition guides the training of the younger ones, both male and female, into the mores and lore of the society. The traditional institution is also revered and the extended family system respected. This explains why in Africa, the issue of tradition is held in high esteem. To challenge the statusquo attracts a lot of penalties. However, with colonization and its aftermath, some of the traditional restrictions and practices are being done away with. This is not to say that they are not in existence even in the 21st century, but the degree of its efficacy and sacredness is minimal compared to the pre-colonial era. Quite a number of Nigerian dramatists have reflected this changing trend in their works. One of such works is Irene Salami-Agunloye's play, *The Queen Sisters* in which she advances the ideological philosophy of advocating for the political, social and economic rights of women.

Her writings mostly drawn from historical and cultural materials of the Benin people have been used to foreground contemporary Nigerian and African drama and uplift the status and image of the oppressed woman. As a one-time president of the National Association of Women in Academics (NAWACS) in Nigeria, she is a woman activist who champions the course of women both in academics and outside. Reference should be made to her campaign against street hawking by children especially the girl-child and the harmful traditional practices like circumcision of women. Ubi, the main character in her play under study, *The Queen Sisters*, stands for change but faces challenges with traditional norms of the society.

Conceptual Clarification – Feminist Movement and Women Empowerment

The feminist movement in Nigeria cuts across several spheres of life and in different disciplines. Politically, there are advocates for

women participation in partisan politics, which should not be left to the exclusive preserve of men. In addition, there are advocates against domestic violence of women, discrimination and subjugation of women's rights and the recognition of their potentials as well as equality with men. Feminism is a multilateral ideology with differing shades, brands and facets to it and such qualifiers as female, feminine, feminist, womanist connote a variety of philosophical standpoints and ideological objectives which define specific brands and modes of feminism. It is pertinent to note here that feminism is an imported term from the West; and thus, African scholars must adopt the term with caution as a universal umbrella for women liberation. Akoh's (2000:137) pontificating on African womanist poetics is quiet an eye opener for African feminists since Anglo-American feminist poetics has not been able to cater for, and thus cannot survive, the environment of the African woman.

He avers that their theorists have indeed no theory to offer Third World or African countries because they are ignorant of the particular experiences of women within the African cultural milieu. African womanism Osita (2008:185) reiterates is an ideology in art and life which explores the oppression of African women and articulates ways of liberating them within the African context. African womanism aligns with western feminism in a wholesome repudiation of the old gender structure and on an avowed redefinition of gender power relations in public and private life aimed at gender balancing in line with the changes in modern life. African women scholars and activists focus on the plight of African women within the African cultural milieu and on the acceptable ways of emancipation that do not negate the essence of African life.

African feminists therefore must theorise based on the cultural contexts of the African society. Some of the African and Nigerian feminists and or womanist activists include playwrights and scholars like Tess Owueme, Julie Okoh, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Mabel Evwierhoma etc. This chapter addresses itself to the feminists'

advocates in Nigeria especially in *The Queen Sisters* by Irene Salami-Agunloye. In terms of feminists' agenda the women creative writers have taken over the driver's seat. In their literary works, African and Nigerian women writers present the stark realities of our time. Writing on Emecheta's works, J.E. Odey (2002) notes that the female writers are no longer satisfied with being observed and discussed, they now want to do the observation and discussion of issues that not only concern women, but humanity as a whole.

The term empowerment on the other hand has several connotations depending on the context of usage. In the political sphere, empowerment is seen as the process of giving power and authority to a person or group of people in order to gain a position for exercising power. Okpaga (2007) acquiesces with Okeke that the term derives from the concept of power and invariably implies that the person or group of persons being empowered had hitherto no power or authority. A holistic definition provided by Sandbook and Halfani and quoted by Okpaga is very appropriate in the understanding of this paper. To them empowerment is a multi-dimensional process involving the transformation of the economic, social, psychological, political, cultural and legal circumstances of the powerless. Women empowerment therefore would entail not only transformation and positive changes from the aforesaid but also the dismantling of the cultural norms and traditional practices that are said to devalue, disempower, and dispossess them. Okpaga (2007:251). Matthew Umukoro's submission on the issue of feminism in an essentially patriarchal society is seminal in the African context:

...for the African woman, female empowerment, is seen, neither as a negation or denial of the fundamental attributes of womanhood, nor the abdication of obvious natural and cultural responsibilities. The goals and objectives of women

empowerment are meant to be conscientiously pursued within the broad context of womanly dignity and social responsibility. (Evwierhoma, Foreword).

Philosophical and Ideological Underpinnings in the works of Irene Salami-Agunloye

Women all over the world suffer one form of oppression or discrimination as each day passes. This is sometimes based on the culture of the society and this affects their matrimonial homes, offices, politics and other spheres of life. Women writers have woken up to the challenge to stand as advocates for the womenfolk out there who cannot be heard simply by virtue of their peripheral positioning. It is in this light that the dramatic artist being discussed in this paper becomes relevant. Irene Salami-Agunloye (2006:47) is optimistic that:

As female writers resort to writing themselves by rewriting these negative portrayals, they will creatively begin to express their discontent and correct the misrepresentation of women. Through their writings, they will erase images of women as victims in the society....

In terms of philosophical and ideological underpinnings Irene Salami-Agunloye's works can be classified under the African womanism school of thought. This school advocates for the recognition of the place of the woman and frowns at the subjugation of the woman by the menfolk and other societal shackles that put them in any bondage.

As a Benin indigene Agunloye was influenced by the works of some reputable Benin Chiefs like Chief Jacob Egharevba's *A short History of Benin*, Chief Osemwingie's *Eguae Ona N' Edo (The Palace of Benin)* and Chief D. N. Oronsaye's *History of Ancient Benin Kingdom and Empire*. She discovered that Benin women who

contributed to society were not acknowledged in the historical material, thus she:

...decries the subjugation of women as she observed in Benin society and she variously made these issues the themes of her plays... A common ideology that runs through her plays is that the woman is capable of taking the centre stage in socio-political issues. This action is an expression of the perspective of the women to criticise the social order and revolt against male domination .Ukwen (2009:63-64).

She uses drama as a creative outlet to express her discontentment with the way the traditional as well as modern societies have not only neglected but relegated and oppressed women. The readership is advertently being conscientized to have a rethink and have positive outlook towards women. The expected change might not be immediate but in the long run, it has the potentials of becoming a reality. The epochal differences will sort themselves out as the society evolves especially in the 21st century where technological advancement has made everything easy; then most women would have known their rights and no one can trample on them. The education of women if taken seriously, will bridge that gap and the most sought for equality and fundamental human rights can be achieved as envisioned by the playwright. The insight she presents into the historical character is essential in understanding the text but does not really capture what transpired as she is not very sure of the reason of her fall:

... The reign of Ubi is shrouded in mystery, till this day. Many feminists' historians have cause to believe that Ubi's purported offence of bed wetting is too trivial to warrant the punishment she was served. They are of the opinion that she probably

challenged the political structure of her time. On the other hand, Queen Ewere's role as a docile and subjugated wife is today commemorated with a state festival. It is therefore not surprising that Ubi's confrontational disposition was strongly resisted and condemned... (p.99)

This authorial insight paints a picture of uncertainty on the historical antecedent that took place concerning Queen Ubi and the royal throne of Benin kingdom. However, we expect that in the main character's construction she should have deconstructed the past to fit into the present by allowing the heroine some leverage instead of towing the line of history which condemned her. Ubi did not live to see the change envisioned and is driven out of the palace. The deconstruction would have enabled the female gender an opportunity to assert herself and right some of the wrongs of tradition. The issue of bed-wetting is not enough reason to expel Ubi from the harem; it is so inconsequential to warrant such an act against her. This is in contrast with the strong character presented in the play challenging the hierarchy of authority represented by patriarchy. In the final analysis, the empowerment sought for is not gained. When characters are allowed to grow, it helps to project the ideology or philosophy of the author. Nevertheless, the singular act of challenging the royal throne shows some kind of bravery and a breaking of the docile picture of the female always witnessed in most Nigerian drama.

Commenting on the gender relations of men and women in Nigerian drama, Osita (2008:185) rationalises that female characters are strongly presented as agents of moral, socio-cultural and even economic reforms, yet it has remained silent on issues and activities that help change their subservient position. She evaluates the dramatic dispositions of the first and second generation of Nigerian dramatists and comes to the conclusion that Nigerian drama favours women functioning effectively in those areas in the society assigned to them by culture.

The Queen Sisters

In this play, Irene Salami-Agunloye centres on Ubi and Ewere the daughters of Chief Ogieka, both royal wives of Oba Ewuare of Benin Kingdom on the one hand and life in the harem with other royal wives on the other. Of the two sisters married to the Oba, Ubi is presented as tough, stubborn and ruthless and does not respect the statusquo both at home and in the harem. Her sister, Ewere seem to be the opposite of Ubi; she is very respectful, humble and relates well with other royal queens in the harem. She turns out to be the most loved queen in the harem by the Oba. Ubi does not want the sister Ewere in the harem and on arrival makes life difficult for her. She maltreats and humiliates Ewere before the other royal queens and innocently involves her in her scheme to kill the Oba.

When the plan fails, she sends her maid Aduwa to hand over the sword to Ewere to give to the Oba. This set up works out perfectly for her as the king (Oba) arrives at the scene and meets Ewere holding a sword. He thus concludes that Ewere wants to kill him. He orders her arrest and Chief Osuma. Ubi's plan to drive Ewere from the palace does not work as investigations reveal the real figure behind the plot and Ewere and Chief Osuma are exonerated at the end. Ubi is however disgraced out of the harem as she is found bedwetting, an abominable act not only in the harem but amongst women in Benin culture. Ewere is elevated and celebrated as the good wife of Oba Ewuare the great.

Women Empowerment and the challenges of tradition in *The Queen Sisters*

The philosophical and creative impetus of the playwright is one of a challenge against patriarchy that forces the woman to act contrary to her will. This is witnessed in the discussion between Chief Ogieka,

his wife and their daughter Ubi. The parents never expect their daughter to challenge them when they make the marriage proposal to her as the Oba's new bride. Culturally it is the pride of every girl to be an Oba's wife but Ubi's case is quiet different as she stands on her right:

Chief Ogieka: ...Iye Ubi, Omo no Oba has asked for your daughter Ubi's hand.

Ubi: Who? ...If Oba promised you anything and you want to trade me, in return, you have got it all wrong this time. I am going nowhere. I will marry only when and to whom I like.

Omoze: (Slaps Ubi) Shut your big mouth. Have you ever seen anybody with honey spitting it out?... (p.19)

Ubi: Mother... You must realize that this is my life you are talking about and not a mere piece of cloth. ...Why should I be compelled to marry a man I hardly know or love? Why mother? Mother why? Shouldn't my husband ask for my hand in marriage himself? Am I not entitled to my own choice? (p.21-22)

In the Benin culture and tradition it is normal for a king to demand at will to marry any girl in his kingdom and parents are forced to oblige. This is the case with Ubi. The father who happens to be a chief himself has no option but to present her once the foot soldiers relay the message. The girl in question becomes a victim of circumstance and all efforts are made to subdue her into submission as presented by Ubi's parents:

Omoze: Shut your mouth, Ubi. Don't say abominable things. Don't put me in trouble. Be careful or you will fall into big trouble. ... Ubi, if you refuse to marry Omo, you will hardly ever get any man who will be willing to marry you since Omo has already indicated interest in you. No man will dare ask for your hand again. (p.22)

Chief Ogieka: ... Now Omoze, if in two weeks time Ubi is not ready to go to the palace; you will pack your load and leave my home with your strong-headed daughter. Is that clear? (p.20)

The implication for refusing to obey is doubled edged - both the mother and daughter would leave the man's house. To protect her marriage the wife embarks on various strategies (persuasion, cajoling and force) to ensure that the daughter obeys. One of the wives Osayaba makes jest of the situation and offers her daughter as replacement if Ubi and her mother disgrace the family. It is the pride of any family to be married to the royal house. At the end of the day despite her resistance, Ubi is forced to marry the Oba against her will.

Her stay in the palace also does not yield any positive result. She is always at loggerhead with the other queens in the harem especially her sister Ewere whom the Oba marries to tame her. Her encounter with the chiefs and the demand for tribute before the Oba is the last stroke that breaks the camel's back. Her actions are seen as an abomination, what a woman should not ask for perhaps due to her gender.

In Africa, during the pre-colonial days the issue of marriage is taken very seriously and a man is allowed to marry as many wives as possible depending on his capability to take care of them. Even in modern day postcolonial set up, this traditional position still holds

sway for some men. The Islamic religion for instance, is said to permit a man to marry up to four wives provided he will love and take adequate care of them equally. Some Christians also fall victim of marrying more than one wife against the Christian teaching provided in the Bible. In the world of the text, the picture presented is such that no woman can say no to the King (Oba) once his emissaries come knocking on the door of a family. All efforts are thereafter made to ensure that the girl goes to the harem. While some are excited about being in the Oba's harem others are not. Ubi falls into this latter category and because of this she faces a lot of opposition. A dialogue between Ubi and her mother will suffice here:

Ubi: Mother, why do you want to force me to marry someone against my wish? Do you know what you are asking me to do? To marry Oba and become one of his numerous wives hidden away in his harem? No, mother I won't succumb to that.

Omoze: You are such a dreamer, asking for the impossible. Wake up from your dream world Ubi, and face the challenges of our time. Why bother yourself with things you have no power to change? Our mothers endured it, so why can't we? (p.22-23).

Ubi is presented as a strong character representing the oppressed woman in the society who has no voice and is not ready to be cowed in or placed under any restrictions. Her will power gives our women folk the hope for the future. Her protest is unequivocal and to the point "You want to hide me away in the palace where I will be placed under several restrictions. I won't shut up, mother. I will protest so that everybody will hear me" (p.23). She does not stop there but reiterates her vision of the kind of marital life she would like to live:

Ubi: ...When I marry, it will be to a man I love. and who will love me equally. A man who will stand by me through thick and thin. A man who will share my thoughts, and I, his. A man who will always be there for me. A man I can have unrestricted access to at any time. A man I call my own, not having to share him with anyone (p.23)

This is akin to Chausiku in Ngugi wa Thiongo's play *I Will Marry When I Want*. Today, girls are no longer forced into marriages as it used to be in the pre-colonial days. No wonder Ubi is optimistic that; "Nothing is permanent in this world. Everything is subject to change no matter how long the practice has been". (p.23) From Ubi, the authorial voice is clear: "Marriage is a relationship between two people who are in love. Not between two strangers; not between numerous people either" (p.23).

Challenging the Royal Throne

The open challenge displayed by Ubi at the palace while Oba Ewuare discharges his official duty before his chiefs is perceived as a threat to the throne. In traditional African set up, women have no say at official gathering but Ubi's demand is seen as an anathema:

Ubi: Your majesty, I demand that you send messengers to Owo, Akure, Ikale, asking them to send their tribute directly to me.

Ewuare: What? You? Ohen, my father. Osanoghdua. What effontery?

Osuma: A wuaaa, abomination. Your Majesty, this is an insult to royalty

Iyase: Your majesty, I think you have given Ubi too many privileges. It is high time you curbed her. (p.58)

The king, Oba Ewuare is taken aback with this unsolicited and abysmal demand and promises to deal with her. The chiefs are equally scandalized with the actions of queen Ubi and they see it as an abomination, insult and disrespect not only to the royalty but to the entire Benin Kingdom. This challenge of the Benin traditional stool by Queen Ubi from the authorial point of view empowers the woman and opens her eyes to leadership and governance while sending a strong message to the men. The chiefs believe that the King is carried away by her beauty that is why he is not taking any drastic action against her as presented by Chief Oliha-”He is dazzled by her beauty. You know her beauty is very intimidating”(p.61). Chief Ihama however frowns at the whole situation “Beauty is not all there is to a woman... The leopard has a beautiful skin but not a beautiful heart. Some women are beautiful but they are serpents and scorpions (p.57). Ubi’s actions raise a lot of questions needing answers: Why would she ask for tributes when she is not the Oba? Of all the wives of Oba, why is she the one asking for tributes? In the hierarchy of wives is she the right person to speak or the Enahen, the head of the harem? In plotting to kill the Oba, what can be her motif? Is she planning to become the next Oba? Or as she puts it: “the real plot is to mess up two worst enemies thereby leading to their downfall or, possibly death” (p.88), thus perpetuating her evil plan of dealing with Chief Osuma and her sister Ewere.

Critically, one expects that in the play, the playwright should have deconstructed the stereotyping of the character of Ubi and elevated her to the height of political ascendancy. The causative reason for her eviction from the harem and eventually the palace is trivial as far as human nature is concerned. The play ought to have deconstructed this fact in a positive way if truly the author wants to

empower her as a heroine. The play simply recounts history without the needed radical transformation. Does Agunloye's intention to advocate for the empowerment of women through the actions of queen Ubi see the light of day? Her challenge of the King and the chiefs in session does not go down well with the royalty and is bound to be punished. Azuike (2003:58) lends credence to this fact that the shabby treatment given to Ubi at the end of the story leaves one wondering if women will ever have a chance to prove themselves worthy of contributing meaningfully to the history and development of a nation.

Ubi's zeal to bring about change in the harem does not go down well with the other women. They see her as a threat because, amongst other things, her stunning beauty attracts the Oba and, being the newest bride in the harem, she is seen as preventing the other women from having access to the king who is their husband. The other women feel she is not being fair to them. The same feeling she is having for the king, they too have and want to be satisfied. The queens complain of sexual dissatisfaction even to the king himself but he feels the older ones are being jealous. This situation can lead some women into illicit sexual activity just to be satisfied.

In *The King's Guard* by Dauda E. Musa, the king Lazambga, is said to be impotent and his servants beget children for the king. The women are seen fighting physically to have the servant for the night. An African adage has it that having too many wives kills manhood. Perhaps that is what must have happened to the king in *The King's Guard*. The Oba in *The Queen Sisters* is presented as a strong man and greatly feared in battle and sexually virile, yet satisfying his wives is a task he cannot accomplish hence their complaints. Enahen, the head of the harem is blamed by the women for their neglect by the Oba, their husband and they attribute it to Ubi his newest bride, whom Enahen fails to checkmate. A dialogue from the aggrieved wives is implicative:

Ivie: ...I did not come here to look at the splendour of the palace; I came to be a wife to Omo No Oba N'Edo, Oba Ewuare.

Ukinebo: I came here to bear princes and princesses. Children do not fly in the air. I cannot throw my stomach against the wood in order to become pregnant. I need a man Iye Erie. I need to sleep with my husband to become pregnant...

Tirosa: Iye Erie, we did not come here to look at the faces of Ibierughas, Ike and Urhonisen. We came here to warm Omo's bosom and bear him children.

Itohan: Iye Erie, we are all tired. We have become more of men than women. (37)

Enahen's complaint which represents the voice of the women in the harem is that they are already enough to make up a village and adding more in a situation where "at the moment you can hardly satisfy all of us... will worsen the situation" (pp.14-15). The King, Oba Ewuare does not take it kindly and threatens her using his manly authority "Enahen ...By the way how dare you challenge my competence? Every queen in favour with the Oba gets full satisfaction. Those not satisfied are serving their deserved punishment" (p.15). This is an indictment on the person of the Oba who refuses to see reason with the Enahen representing the other unsatisfied women. They have been deprived of the pleasure they use to have with the Oba since the arrival of Ubi. The act of sexual starvation is one of the oppression the women are fighting against. The man acquires so many wives and just keeps them in the house the way pictures are kept hanging in the sitting room. Such manly acquisitions are being questioned and interrogated. The protagonist however, does not live to bring about the desired

change she claimed “ I came here to fulfil a mission. To bring about a drastic change in the harem” (p.31). Ubi is presented as a strong character from the beginning of the play and her stay in the harem also proves it, but the reason for her eviction from the harem is not strong enough. In the traditional context what she does is seen as an abomination and a very serious offence and the punishment is eviction. The strong character suddenly crumbles. One expects a more challenging encounter from her, especially the challenge of her father, the chiefs, Oba and other queens in the harem.

Conclusion

The import of the play *The Queen Sisters* by Irene Salami-Agunloye is being read and imbibed widely amongst the intelligentsia along with some other feminists’ literatures which are becoming ubiquitous in Nigerian and in no distant future the feminists’ quest of equal rights in politics, work, and other obnoxious laws made to pull down the woman would be achieved. However, the issue of cultural contexts in feminists struggle must be taken seriously as African society is still largely patriarchal. *The Queen Sisters* calls for women to rise and counter all traditional structures that encourage the relegation of women to a second place in the society. Agunloye empowers her female characters to contest political issues and she also portrays them as capable of doing what men can do and even doing them better. She believes that women are interested in the well being of the nation and their contributions to socio-economic development must be recognised and harnessed. To achieve this Asabe Mamman (2004:73) notes that the early subtle socialization methods tend to have wounded women into believing and internalizing the belief that women are meant only to provide supportive roles to men who are seen as national leaders of the society. The woman is socialized into believing that she is passive and irrational. This

traditional socialization process has continued to remain in women and is manifesting its effects on women in every sphere of their lives. Bamidele's (2000) *Literature and Sociology* insists that Agunloye's works agree with the prevailing view of the artist's role and function which is that of commitment to revolution. It is a socio-political role. The artist sees his role and that of his art as a weapon to advocate for radical changes in society.

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