

A Feminist Appraisal of Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*



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ABSTRACT: This paper attempts a feminist appraisal of Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*. It begins with discussing the stereotypical portrayal of women in male-authored works and the tenets of feminism. The work attempts to answer some feminist questions postulated by Ann Dobie to analyze a feminist text. The study discusses the text by analyzing stereotypes of women, how the male characters talk about women, the treatment of female characters by male characters, and socially and politically powerful characters in the text. The study concludes that women are capable and can perform better when they lead. They should be educated and empowered economically.

INTRODUCTION

Patriarchal societies marginalize African women. Men determine what women should do. These women have no voice. In most male-authored works, they portray women as marginalized characters. According to Gloria Chukukere (1995:7) as cited in Sotunsa (2008:81)

The ideal female created by male writers in fiction often acts within the framework of her traditional roles as wife and mother. So, strong are social values that the respect and love which a woman earns are relative to the degree of her adaptations of these roles.

Writers depict many African women reductively. They are depicted as rural stars or ravaged urbanwhores when described by their male counterparts. Most works of literature depend upon a series of fixed images of women stereotypes. They classify women as either good or evil. Under the category of the good woman stereotype are the patient wife, submissive, mother and a lady. In the evil category are deviants who reject or do not adequately serve men or their interests. Male writers depict women as older women, madwomen, witches, lesbians and prostitutes. Male-authored works rarely grant primary status to female characters. The male authors relegate the roles of women to the background. They are depicted as silent and submissive, remaining absent from the public sphere. Oladele Taiwo (1984) states that "the male novelists, have created in their fiction an image of the African woman which needs to be closely re-examined against the background of other traditional, social and economic realities of the present."

A look at most of the early writings of the African male writers reveals that women are seen more as mothers and wives, than as professionals. This kind of mother stereotype, to a large extent, results in the limitation of a woman's potential as a contributor to national development. However, it is proof that "literature is a reflection of society." A famous literary critic, Ogundipe-Leslie (1987:6), made this observation about African writings: "...there is the figure of the sweet mother, the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice." To buttress her point, Ogundipe-Leslie quotes some of the stereotypes that Mary Ellam wrote about in her work, *Thinking about Women*: "Her list of imputed female attributes includes formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliance; and two incorrigible figures: the shrew and the witch." Such degrading qualities attributed to women in the works of some of the early male writers like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* are quite unfortunate.

Fortunately, the few African female writers who were able to brace the odds and get well educated did not relent in their efforts at changing the somewhat minor roles that women characters played in the novels of some of the significant African writers. These female writers created female characters who were dynamic and well-focused and who dared to turn their backs on some of the irrelevant traditional stipulations aimed at subjugating women.

According to Anthonia Kalu (2000), the representation of women in the writing of African women is quite different. She cites examples like Mariamba's *So Long a Letter*, Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* and Bessie Head's short story – "The Collector of Treasures". She states that although the writers situate the central female characters in these stories in different cultural, economic, religious and political environments, they face similar dilemmas of how to survive and support their dependent families and how to develop relationships with men based on equality, love and mutual respect.

Various traditions and cultures of a people disempower women. As a means of female empowerment, African female writers have

A Feminist Appraisal of Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*

created female protagonists, who are industrious, determined and have control over their own lives. They oppose the stereotypical portrayal of women in male writings. Nolas-Alausa (2012) affirms that:

The agitations for female rights have since then become a major preoccupation of feminine writings. The African continent also embraced this global initiative as its women have also since independence engrossed themselves with such writings which have led them to highlight the agonies, travails and marginalization which women suffer. (p. 164).

THE CONCEPT OF FEMINISM

Feminism, a movement against patriarchy, aims at empowering women. Nolas-Alausa quotes Green and Kahn (1985) as stating that:

Feminist ideology undertakes the dual task of deconstructing male cultural paradigms and reconstructing a female perspective and experience in an effort to change the tradition that has silenced and marginalized women. Feminism also originates and participates in a larger effort of liberating women from the structures that have marginalized them, thereby seeking not only to reinterpret but also change the world (p. 164).

Tyson postulates that efforts have been made by many female writers to resist patriarchy right from Mary Wollstonecraft's, *A Vindication of the Rights of women* (1792); Virginia Wolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). Writers continue to resist it today. Some of these African female writers include Flora Nwapa, Butchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba and Ama Ata Aidoo. Women's empowerment and equality have been the preoccupation of African female writers. Therefore, Sotunsa (2008:84) affirms that "In a typical female writing, the woman is the protagonist. She is often industrious, dynamic and resourceful rather than weak, docile and dependent". Female characters possess qualities of independence, dynamism and industry which the society and male writers hitherto associated with the male.

According to Shettar, (2015: 13), women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. It refers to the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status by women, the traditionally underprivileged ones in the society. Women's empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination, and the general feeling of persecution that goes with being a woman in a traditionally male-dominated structure.

The feminist premise is summarized by Tyson (2006: 91-92) as follows:

1. Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept.
2. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is the other. She is objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she (allegedly) lacks and that men (allegedly) have.
3. All of Western (Anglo-European) civilization is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology, as seen for example, in the numerous patriarchal women and female monsters of Greek and Roman literature and mythology; the patriarchal interpretation of the biblical Eve as the origin of sin and death in the world; the representation of woman as a nonrational creature by traditional western philosophy and the reliance on phallogocentric thinking (thinking that is male oriented in its vocabulary rules of logic, and criteria for what is considered objective knowledge) by educational, political and legal and business institutions.
4. Female, culture determines our gender (masculine or feminine). That is the word gender refers not to one's anatomy but to one's behaviour socially programmed men and women.
5. All feminist activity including feminist theory and literary criticism, has as its ultimate goal to change the world by promoting women's equality. Thus all feminist activity can be seen as a form of activism, although the word is usually applied to feminist activity that promotes social change through political activity such as public demonstrations, boycotts, voter education and registration, the provision of hotlines for rape victims and shelters for abused women, and the like.
6. Gender issues play a part in every aspect of human production and experience, including the production and experience of literature, whether we are consciously aware of these issues or not.

Ann Dobbie (2009: 114) further advances that feminist criticism has many strands, but most critics hold some general approach in common. She further states that:

Despite the sprawling nature of feminist studies, it is possible to group some of the different perspectives into overlapping social approaches. Three major groups of feminist critics are those who study difference, those who study power relationships and those who study female experience.

Tyson (2006: 85) states that traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective and decisive; they cast women as (irrational), weak, nurturing and submissive. These gender roles have justified inequalities, such as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions (in the family as well as in politics, academia, and the corporate world). However, some African female writers view traditional gender roles as archaic. They, therefore, portray in their writings women in leadership positions. One such writer is Tess Onwueme in her play *The Reign of Wazobia*. This work studies the power relationships.

Author's Background

From "Guide to Tess Osonye Onwueme's Papers 1957-2014," it is revealed that Dr. Tess Osonye Onwueme was born on September

A Feminist Appraisal of Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*

8, 1955, in Ogwashi-Uku (now Delta State, Nigeria). She received her Bachelor's degree in Education from the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) in 1979, a Master's degree in literature from the University of Nigeria in 1982, and Ph.D. in English from the University of Benin, Nigeria in 1987. She is an endowed chair University Professor of Global Letters at the University of Wisconsin, following her years of service as a Distinguished Professor of Cultural Diversity and Professor of English.

Dr. Onwueme is a winner of several international awards, including the prestigious Folon-Nicholas Award (2009), the Phyllis Wheatley Distinguished Award (2007), The Martin Luther King Jr. Distinguished Writers Award (1989/1990), The African Distinguished Author Award (1988), a four-time winner of Association of Nigerian Authors Award (ANA) 2013, 2001, 1995, and 1985. She was appointed to the US Department of State Public Diplomacy Speaker and Specialist Program for Northeast and West in 2007.

Dr. Onwueme has published over twenty creative dramas, including such provocative plays as *No Vacancy* (2005), *What Mama Said* (2004), *Then She Said It* (2003), *Shakara: Dance Hall Queen* (2001), *Tell It to Women* (1997; 1995), *The Missing Face* (2006, 2002), *Riot in Heaven* (1996, 2002), *Legacies* (1989), *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), *Mirrors for Campus* (1987), *Ban Empty Barn and Other Plays* (1986), *The Desert Encroachers* (1985), *The Broken Calabash* (1984), and *Why the Elephant Has No Butt* (2000). Her literary works focus on the conflict between rich and poor, modern and traditional, and the conflict of inner-self. According to Tanure Ojaide, a poet and a critic, "Tess Onwueme easily stands out as the most prolific and outstanding female dramatist of a new generation of African writers. Her characters, who are simultaneously deeply rooted in humanity, native and African culture, exude confidence in their roles in society. Onwueme's strong and purposeful women believe often paddled view that African women are weak and submissive.

Her plays propel the intersection of women's rights with tradition and ritual in Nigeria. In a foreword to *Three Plays: The Broken Calabash, Parables for a Season and The Reign of Wazobia*, Daniella Gioseffi (1991) affirms that the protagonists of Dr. Tess Onwueme's plays tend to be women who revolt against their misuse by an outdated, inhumane system.

Feminist Assessment of *The Reign of Wazobia*.

The discussion answers a few questions that Ann Dobie sets to help in analyzing a feminist text. According to Ann Dobie (2009:122), in analyzing a feminist text, the following questions can be used:

1. What stereotypes of women do you find?
2. How do the male characters talk about female characters?
3. How do the male characters treat the female characters?
4. Who are socially and politically powerful characters?

Stereotypes of Women

In *The Reign of Wazobia*, Tess creates a powerful heroine, Wazobia, who is picked from the dancers to become a regent after the death of the former King (Obi Ogosi) of Ilaa, in the Anioma Kingdom for three seasons. She is upset with the stereotyped roles that society has framed for women. Women are to take care of their husbands and go through widowhood rites when their husbands die. She does all she can in her power to help the women overcome such roles. She thinks that women can achieve full empowerment if they rise above sex-role stereotypes.

She condemns the rites of widowhood, a role that tradition has set for women. The king of women, Omu, leads the late king's wives through the streets. "The king's wives are typically wrapped in mourning outfits; a black piece of cloth, tied from chest to down, no blouses, hair beaded, shaved right round and carved in bonds to number three" (Wazobia:134)

Wazobia is having a meeting with the widows and the Omu interrupts the conversation. As soon as she enters, the women begin panicking and they fall down on their knees to greet her. She is angry about the fact that the entire kingdom is waiting for the widows to make their appearance at the marketplace to complete the funeral rites for the king. Wazobia objects to that tradition in the following conversation:

Why may I ask, must widows be subjected to the torment of incessant funeral rites that men are free of, under similar situations, Omu?

It is our tradition that women who survive funeral rituals dance in the marketplace as the final mark of their innocence regarding their husbands' deaths. A woman who dies mourning is unclean and must be left to rot in the evil forest.

Wazobia: (Arrogantly)

I see Omu, my women will not dance naked in public to appease the eyes of a wrathful populace. This is no era for dancing to entertain lustful eyes. (Wazobia: 144).

Another stereotypical role of women is revealed by a man who chases his wife into the palace. The woman runs in gasping and calls on the king to save her. To the man, he thinks that the woman is his property and can choose to do anything he likes to her. To him, "a man must own a wife to bear him children" (Wazobia:146). This is the only role assigned to women as seen in the ensuing dialogue:

(Threateningly). You may run into a mouse hole. These heads must teach you today that they were not made of decaying plantain stems, come out and I'll show you...

A Feminist Appraisal of Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*

Wazobia: (To the man). Do you realize that what you are doing now is against tradition?

Tradition forbids you to touch anyone who has the protection of another. And moreso, your king? Is it that men in these parts make traditions for others to bear them?

Man: Tradition?

And is that why a woman, a mere woman that I paid to get with my own hard-earned money should challenge me in my house? Does she think I carry these balls between my thighs for nothing? (Wazobia: 145, 146).

It is presumed that women must be submissive. This fact is buttressed by the man who thinks that his wife cannot challenge him in his own house.

How Male Characters Talk About Women

The male characters in *The Reign of Wazobia* have the traditional male idea that males are superior to women. To this extent, a man vows never to allow a woman to lie on his top. He says:

I have said it time and time again, I will offer myself for castration, the day I allow a woman that I paid for with my own money to lie on my top and taunt me with her fingers.

Tell me how

In my own house

Why I should come home and not find my food.

With my woman waiting on the table (Wazobia: 152).

The male characters think that women are to satisfy them. They have to stay at home and cook for their husbands. They cannot allow a woman to rule them. In Idehen's house, he is portrayed as a confused man, pacing up and down. He cannot accept the fact that a woman is ruling their village. He says:

What use am I? A toy cup in the fingers of a mere woman.

What use am I? A chief they call me who can stand on two feet and ten toes and allow a woman, a mere woman to clear her rotten throat and spit the phlegm at my face? As night overtakes day, we sit in complacency, while Wazobia

... Wazobia wears the crown and stands between us... but Wazobia is a woman. A woman is a woman, whether she lies high or low (Wazobia: 155).

The men further think that in order to bring the downfall of a woman, they can use her fellow woman. Idehen and Iyase plan the downfall of Wazobia and Iyase suggests that he shall use Wazobia's women against her. They argue that Wazobia has stayed beyond her limit as a regent. They call her names like fattened cow and goat. Iyase says:

Iyase: ... it is a very easy argument, persuading them to force Wazobia down from the throne

Men will depose Wazobia

Wazobia, that fattened cow must crumble tomorrow, we assemble all the chiefs and men of Ilaa...

The black goat must be chased into roost early, lest it strays into night, Damaging valuable barns (Wazobia: 159).

All these names used to describe Wazobia explain the enormity of their anger for a woman to rule them. Anehe thinks that Wazobia's reign has drastically changed how things used to be in their community. He thinks that her reign is suggestive of equality for both males and females, which in the traditional sense should not be. He says:

Well, that is another problem. Since Wazobia ascended the throne, most traditions have been turned upside down. Wives no longer take turns to cook and compete for their husband's tongue and stomach. Wazobia insists

that we all cook and share together. Reducing us all to the same lives. There is no longer incentive to try (Wazobia: 165).

The men think that "Wazobia is like a decaying tooth which must be extracted from the mouth of their clan" (Wazobia: 170). The use of this simile is suggestive of the fact that if they do not uproot her, she will cause lots of problems, especially for the men in the clan.

Treatment of Female Characters by Male Characters

The male characters opine that women should not be involved in decision-making. To them, women are not so intelligent to contribute to serious matters affecting the state. Hence, when Wazobia meets the entire kingdom in her palace to discuss the rules of governance and Iyase suggests that they should send the women and the youth out, all the men nod in approval. Idehen supports the motion by stating:

I support what my fellow chief, Iyase has to say. Serious matters of state concern are too heavy for the brittle heads of women and children (Wazobia: 148).

The male characters also treat their wives as objects. They beat them at the least provocation. Wazobia calls the man who beats his wife a brute and explains that it is because he pounds a grown woman like fufu in a mortar" (Wazobia: 151). Wazobia enacts a law against wife-beating as she declares:

Today we put a final seal on wife battering.

A decree is hereby promulgated on wife beating.

For none is slave to another. Man and woman decree as partners in progress, not antagonists (Wazobia: 153).

Wazobia asks the man who beats his wife to apologize, but to him, he has done nothing abominable. He thinks that is how husbands

A Feminist Appraisal of Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*

should treat their wives. He raises his clothes from behind, baring his bottom for his wife to see before all, a traditional method of declaring a divorce. He walks out and other men follow him to express their support. The men's behaviour is a confirmation of how men think that women can be used and dumped at any time.

The Socially and Politically Powerful Characters

Tess portrays her heroine, Wazobia, as socially and politically powerful. In the traditional sense, men are supposed to be the powerful ones. To confirm the idea of female empowerment in the play, Wazobia exhibits many characteristics that make her powerful. She is the regent of Ilaa and she tries to use her position to emancipate and empower women of her society. She encourages the women to emancipate themselves from their state of submission as she says:

Arise, women!

They say your feet are feeble, Show them those hands have claws
Show them those hands are heavy Wake up, women!

Arise, women!

Barricade the entrance to the city
I can hear trumpet sounds,

Voices of men spitting blood to drown us
with your claws, hook them,

But spill no blood, for these are sons of our wombs (Wazobia:127)

Her reign makes the men of Ilaa uncomfortable. She has reigned for only three seasons. The men are complaining and want her to step down. Wazobia says:

Ha hahahaaaa!!

For three seasons Wazobia has reigned. Three seasons, just three seasons,

And men are sweating in their anuses. Three seasons!!

And now they want me to step down
Should I or

Should I not? (p. 129).

The men are uncomfortable with her reign because she is empowering the women. This, the men view as a thing that can bring chaos to their community. The men, as well as Omu, the king of women, think that Wazobia is bent on destroying tradition. To Wazobia, she only wants the emancipation of women. She says:

Women, that is the task before you,
To set the hand of the clock aright,

To move time, not allow time to move you,
It's our time to till, it's our time to end,

That we may be planted on firm soil... (Wazobia, 145).

Iyase and Idehen sarcastically comment on the women's idea of emancipation and liberation. They ask whether their liberation is from the kitchen or from where. Or their emancipation from lying below to lying on top?

Wazobia is a powerful woman who can control men. In a meeting, she shouts at Iyase to shut up since she has not granted him the opportunity to talk. She delivers a powerful manifesto to them, all in favour of women: equal representation in rulership, education of women and equal rights of inheritance in matters of land and property. She declares:

Now hear our manifesto. Henceforth, the symbol of our kingdom shall be the palm tree which from top to bottom has all and produces all; From leaves to thatch, to shade, to broom. From fruit to wine, to oil, to kernel... That is the palm. Each part, its own value and yet interdependent on all other parts. We all, man, woman, child, must be schooled. To actualize these potentials for full benefit, for all with none posing an obstacle to another, with the left hand washing the right, and the right hand the left. Henceforth, women will have equal representation in rulership. Schools will be built.

To tutor women and bring out the best of their potentials.
To sharpen their awareness.

Henceforth, women shall have equal rights of inheritance in matters of land and property!

Today, we put a final seal on wife battering. A decree is hereby promulgated on wife beating.

For none is slave to another. Man and woman decreed as partners not antagonists (Wazobia: 153).

The importance of female education is reiterated. It is because of Wazobia's education that she has the opportunity to reign. Zo confirms: "Thanks to education! Wazobia, too, has every cause to toast her power" (Wazobia:138).

Wazobia, during her reign, empowers the women economically. She encourages them to utilize their God-given talents and make life meaningful for themselves. Women are encouraged not to depend on men for their survival entirely. They should also work to gain economic freedom. Wazobia says:

... Women have ears. Why must they be prevented from hearing with them? Women have heads. Why must they be stifled with cotton wool only useful for cleaning up their men? Women have hands. Why must they not be allowed to use them fully to construct? Who among you can weave? Go take up your looms and weave. Who among you here can trade? Go weave to cover us from our nakedness... With or without man, make a meaning of your life (Wazobia:154).

Unity in the lives of the women of Ilaa also contributes to the power in their society. The men of Ilaa plan to oust Wazobia. The women upon hearing this come together to form an arc around her. They give her their full backing. Omu encourages them:

At this moment, men hold their meeting to unseat Wazobia
Wazobia is us.

We are Wazobia

A Feminist Appraisal of Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*

Together we stand. What they plan is abominable and we shall match force with force. Together, join hands... (Wazobia: 166)
As the men approach Wazobia, the women sound their war cries and form an arch behind Wazobia. The men retreat and the women jubilate with Wazobia. Women remain victorious. According to Chukuma (2004), Wazobia displayed a remarkable astuteness in mobilization and governance while she was regent. Having thus tasted power, she decides to usurp the throne and empower women. Wazobia's women empowerment drives her campaign strategy and mobilization ability revealing her determination to cling to power and lift women to the peak of political leadership in Ilaa land.

CONCLUSION

In *The Reign of Wazobia*, Wazobia successfully deconstructs the erroneous impression that women cannot successfully lead men. Women are portrayed as capable of competing with men in occupying the seat of power. The point is that women can compete with men and defeat them. For women to be empowered, they must be united to fight a common cause. They must empower themselves economically by awakening to embark on income-generation activities rather than stick themselves to the traditional roles of mothers and housekeepers. Women should be involved in decision-making to bring developments to a nation. Women's education and economic viability are means of women's empowerment. Though the male characters view the female characters as inferior, they are proved wrong by Wazobia, an influential female leader who uses her position to empower and emancipate the women in her society and to prove to men that women are capable.

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