A Critical Gender Analysis of James Atu Alachi's *Enekole*

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Abstract

Gender is a concept that has gained so much attention in the theatre today. This is due to the current agitation and turbulent struggle that women have been doing because of the oppression, mistreatment and relegation they face every day as a result of patriarchy – the culture of male domination that has secured a foothold mostly in dramas written by male playwrights. James Atu Alachi seems to be different. This paper, through the analytical approach, attempts an investigation into one of Alachi's plays, *Enekole*, in order to point out the fact that there are male playwrights of this present generation that can join their creative hands with those of the female playwrights to ensure a gender sensitive and equal Africa.

Keywords: Gender, patriarchy

1.0 Introduction

Gender or feminist study is one of the dominant discourses in humanities today. The relevance of gender is basically as a result of discriminatory treatment women have suffered throughout history. These discriminatory practices and attitudes against women are maintained in literary works which are either promoting them or condemning them. In dramatic texts, especially those written by men, women are seen as victims of men's machinations. Women are portrayed as passive as against men who are assertive. Men initiate sexual acts, business, politics etc, passivity is considered a lower virtue and is feminine while assertiveness which is a higher virtue is considered to be masculine. Drama over the years has tended to encourage or endorse the perpetration of the myth of female inferiority and male superiority. However, there are playwrights who have succeeded in bringing the issues out for readers and audience to make adjustments in their daily interaction and decisions. These playwrights have created characters who have expressed these gender gaps that result in female subjugation and oppression. Atu Alachi is among these playwrights who have given women the rare virtue of heroism in the plays. He can be placed beside Femi Osofisan and others who are male playwrights in the theatre of women. Alachi has succeeded in contemplating properly the struggles and trajectories that women who want to excel face in their world which they share with men. Enekole is portrayed as a woman who struggles to counteract cultural hindrances that women face in a bid to live beyond the average in a male dominated world. This research work is an attempt at analyzing "Enekole" with the view to discover the visibility, empowerment, conscientisation and other virtues that have been given women through Alachi's very artistic dramaturgy even when the struggle for gender equality was at its early stages in Nigeria theatre. This attempt has investigated the play in conjunction with international standards for assessing the degree of gender consciousness of a play. Enekole is not the only play written by Alachi, other plays are The Gods Are to Blame which happens to be another adaptation of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex; there are Your Precious Ihotu and The Dilemma of Oko.

2.0 The Synopsis of Enekole

Enekole is a play that was first given a trail production at the College of Education, Katsina-Ala in 1986 but the actual maiden production was by Theatre students of Benue State University, Makurdi in 1995. It was published in 1997. The play is about its major character that goes with the same name as the title of the play, Enekole. She is adjudged in the play as the pretty daughter of Adakole who dreams very big and wants to conquer her world, both human and material using her beauty thereby exploring the weakness of men through it. The play opens up with the traditional wedding between Enekole and Omale, whom the latter assumes she has been a virgin. Her uncle Ame stands and pours accolades on the bride and the family also praises her for her chastity to the admiration of the crowd. Adakole, Enekole's father cannot also hold back his joy, he stands up and expresses his love for his daughter whom he describes as "...pretty, well- behaved, and highly

cultured". (3) It is a marriage relationship, but we soon realize that Enekole is expressing her disapproval of the attitudes of Omale and also cherishing the bad ways of life she has led in the past before her marriage. Omale returns home from work with the news that he is going to Lagos for an executive course which he deprives Enekole from visiting him in order not to distract him. She warns him that she is not made up of stone, she will need a man near her, but Omale insists that she should not visit him while in Lagos. He also warns her not to do anything stupid in his absence because he will make her life miserable. Unfortunately, she succumbs to men who get her pregnant. When Omale returns from Lagos, Enekole tries to make him sleep with her, but he declines. She soon shows signs of pregnancy and she confesses what she has done in Omale's absence. The marriage immediately collapses and this makes Adakole, who believes in purity as tradition demands, to disown his daughter. Enekole's drive to freedom soon leads her into the world of men and she meets Johnny who is her boyfriend who introduces her to Chief Bama, the Managing Director of Alabama Firm so that she can get a job for her. Bama also falls to Enekole's charming beauty and the two decide to marry each other. But this is vehemently opposed by Bama's wife, Ifeoma which becomes like a cold war going on. The marriage plan pushes Enekole back home and succeeds in reconciling with parents and relations. Ifeoma, who cannot rest on her oars, decides finally to warn Enekole in the presence of Bama and she also exposes Enekole's ugly past. But Bama pays little attention to it thereby holding tight to his new found lover. The angry Ifeoma who storms out is soon reported dead by the messenger. This is quickly followed by the fire disaster that guts all the property that Bama and Enekole have. This takes them back to poverty.

3.0 The Concept of Gender

Gender has been defined by Olujobi as:

..... the division of humanity into two
distinctive categories based on their sex.
Sex refers to the obvious biological differences
between men and women (126).

By this definition above, we are meant to understand that gender is used to show how society constructs feminine and masculine people – but also with how society confers powers on each of the sexes. This is why there is gender inequality because the power conferred on men by the society is higher than that of women. This is very obvious in Africa and this is why African women have long arisen to challenge some of these gender issues. Gender issues are gaps and obstacles that stand in the way of insuring equality between males and females in the society. In most fields of human endeavour, women have long started challenging stereotypical roles given to them by the male folk. Arts are not an exception to this discourse. Most female playwrights of the contemporary generation have, in one way or the other, challenged the portrayal of their folk in dramatic works.

Popular names include Tess Onwulme, Irene Salani-Agnnloye, Julie Okoh, Tracie Otoh to mention a few. It is sad to note that only few male playwrights have represented women in positive light. Femi Osofisan must be recognized in putting women on a high pedestal; no wonder Tess Onwueme (68) acknowledges this fact when she says:

A major aspect of Osofisan's revolution in modern Nigerian drama is the prominence and the consistent portrayal of women as heroes and harbinger's of social reconstruction.

Osofisan has made sure that he leaves no room for injustice to any gender in his dramatic works. This is not far from what Alachi has done in *Enekole* because of the prominence given to the main character but this will be discussed in another segment of this paper in relation to the text.

4.0 Gender Analysis of Enekole

Before we attempt a gender analysis of *Enekole* as play, we want to compare it with other plays Alachi has creatively written. In *The Gods are to Blame*, Akanya finds himself in the same fate as King Oedipus and King Odewale who must commit incest. But in the case of *The Gods are to Blame*, it is about an ordinary man, not a king and he is educated. He also rapes his sister and his brother's wife. In *Your Precious Ihotu*, Alachi takes on people who will always insist on having children not at the right time, Agada, a desperado is tricked and cheated by Ojo who deceives him about her fake pregnancy which turns out to be a calabash. Isn't it funny? In *The Dilemma of Oko*, Alachi explores some of the dilemmas people go into that leave them with no better option to take. It is like choosing whom to rescue between one's father and mother. Perhaps, in *The Gods are to Blame*, we can say that it is not just the theme of predestination that is involved. One can also find that those who insist on causing excruciating pain to women soon face their petard. And that those who are supposed to ensure that the law is kept are persistently its breakers. The police are the ones raping women not the ordinary civilians in the text. *Enekole* appears quite unique among the plays written by Alachi. It is about empowerment of women. It is about the freedom and choices women should enjoy exploring when faced with patriarchal challenges. This is because the play deals with patriarchy in full course. Women empowerment refers to the emancipation of women from the derogatory and oppressive roles given to them by their societies by helping them discover their potentials and removing all barriers and inequalities, giving women equal opportunities with men. Discrimination against Nigerian women, where culture plays a strong and dominant role completely disregarding and relegating the women, is the driving force behind Alachi's *Enekole*.

Doofan and Alachi point out that:

Empowerment refers to the removal of

structural constraints that curtail women's ability to control their lives and resources. Empowerment means self-reliance for women in making independent decisions in all areas of society and the economy. (192)

This is exactly what Alachi does in Enekole, he allows her to make her decisions independently. He makes her, first, the heroine of the play because she is the character who dominates the play. Even when Omale warns her not to do anything stupid after disallowing her of any visit to him while in Lagos, thereby setting up a trap for her, she does in his absence what she wants. Alachi ensures that if the man thinks he possesses a stronger will power than the women, he gives Enekole the virtue of beauty that men must fall for. This is why the end of the play gives both man and woman the same fate, all their property are destroyed. Alachi does not create Enekole to go down to the level which Ama Atta Aidoo relegates Anowa, as Enahoro would put it:

Anowa, the wife of Kofi, is a strong and intelligent woman who has to pretend to be less than herself in order for Kofi her husband to be a man. (25)

This characterization by a female playwright is not ennobling for women folk and this is far below Alachi's pitch of Enekole who is assertive and active. The tone of her assertiveness can be felt in Enekole's conversation when Omale returns from Lagos and discovers she is pregnant for someone else:

Omale: I suspect as muchwho is the gallant man?
Enekole: I don't know
Omale: You mean you don't know the man who has put you in the family way?
Enekole: I don't know
Omale: will you stop that melodrama and tell me or I smack you?
Enekole: I don't know
Omale: (Slapping her) Stop that nonsense and give me his name.
Enekole: Kill me if you want. I will never tell you. All I know is I don't know (9).

To say what is factual, even the woman of Soyinka's creation would succumb to this slap, but Enekole does not. But her assertiveness does not rob her of the good virtue of remorse when she decides later to go and reconcile with her father preparatory to her marriage to Bama which does not see the light of the day. She does not just go empty handed, she takes some gifts of electric generator, clothes and TV set to him.

According to Flora Nwapa, one of the foremost female writers in Nigeria, that:

The woman's role in Africa is crucial for the survival and progress of the race. This is, of course, true of all women across the globe, be they black or white.... Male authors understandably neglect to point out the positive side of womanhood, for very many reasons which I will not attempt to discuss in this address. (526)

This is not the case with Alachi who has brought what is good about Enekole. As for Ifeoma, the wife of Chief Bama, she is right to be jealous of another woman who wants to take over her husband, just as Johnny feels bad and jealous when Bama snatches Enekole from him. A lot of feminist critics have assessed Zulu Sofola's plays as writings that are pro-tradition or pro-patriarchy, in support of male dominance. Such critics point out the fact that women in a play like *Wedlock of the Gods* are given to tradition and it is female characters such as Odibei and Nneka that are used in stamping the authority of tradition on Ogwoma. But the hidden fact remains that it plays like those of Sofola that have opened up the eyes of these radical feminist playwrights to the struggles and challenges that women face in the society and in the world of literary writings. Folabo Ajayi makes the point clearer when she says:

Sofola gives the theatre audience a respite from these unusual power wielding women and presents the ordinary women, as she struggles with her plight and fate within the society. (24)

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, her first published play, Ogwoma with her lover Uloko defies tradition and dares the consequences. Before paying for her act of abomination with the ultimate penalty, she is subjected to an unrelieving state of mental agony as a spate of verbal recriminations relentlessly descend on her from various members of the community. Alachi's Enekole is a step forward in the sense that the struggles Enekole faces are partly traditional and also socio-economical in nature. The aspects that pertain to tradition are tied to her relationship with men in the play as a boyfriend or as a would-be husband, in the case of chief Bama. For instance, Adakole insists on the chastity of Enekole as a woman, but the society is salient about the chastity of the men that have "put her in the family way" (9), although Omale is portrayed as a saint in the play, but what about Jonny and Chief Bama who are there with all their freedom to choose to do whatever they like? On the socio-economic struggles, it is the same fate or challenges that women and men face. This is why Alachi ensures that their hope is the same at the end of the play. The message is quite straightforward for both folks:

Enekole: ... The reward of sin is dead, but I am not dead Forgive me my sins, if really I have committed any (pause). I started from the grassroots,

used my body to an advantage. But just when I thought I had made it, the world crumbled from under my foot. My brothers and sisters, never call yourself a success till the grave opens its mouth for you. Rich one moment, poor the next ... No! No!! Not in this wretched condition. Till I make it again, I am still beautiful, I am still young, men are still in this world. It simply means starting all over again (33)

Before these comprehensive words, Enekole asks the where about of Bama whom she first thought she could rely on. But he is now nowhere to be seen at the moment of adversity and pain. We can confidently say that the above words spoken through Enekole are the authorial voice by Alachi's heroine. Here, he has placed the women on a higher pedestal to push on. He does not leave her just at the "Fringe" as Mabel I.E Ewrierhoma would say of Tess Onwueme's female characters; that though they dominate her drama, but they are left at such side not the centre.(2) But Mabel, again, gets this fact correct when compared to the high points of Alachi's play, Enekole, in this way: I have elsewhere observed that play texts are political signs as well as relational signs to society, its events, concepts, attitude, which regulate it. (2) A close attention that is paid to Enekole would show the high degree of the political signs enunciated and how the need for regulation or adjustment should be guaranteed if we are to progress as a people.

5.0 Recommendations for Onward Progress

According to Uma Narayan that:

Feminists have stressed the need to think about issues of gender in conjunction with, and not in isolation from, issues of class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation and have forcefully illustrated that differences among women must be understood and theorized. (416)

A writer cannot claim to have dealt with the big question on gender equality when his or her own coverage is just the urban women. Even in the urban areas, there are economically advantage women and there are the wretched of them. But the crux of the headache of gender inequality is to be found in rural areas. So playwrights and critics must address the issues jointly with the facts of location, class and levels of education of the women. Majorly, the orientation has remained in the townships neglecting the rural women that are worse of. In almost the same vein, Pomak Frank Tangya Opines the fact that:

The backdrop of women's rights movement is built on the pedestal of campaigning for fairness to women in cultural, political, social and economic terms. Some rights that are of concern to women are equal opportunity in

education, employment, control of personal property, the right to vote and equality in terms of sexual freedom. (356)

Alachi has creatively identified these issues in *Enekole*. It is all about fairness in all ramifications. Women are always oppressed and marginalized when it comes to enjoying cultural, political, social, economic and sexual freedoms. In terms of private ownership of property, she is not given the conducive atmosphere to explore her potentials toward owning wealth. It is always her parents or husband that enjoys laying claim to such rights. It becomes disturbing that at this fast moving age, you find parents who are still bent on choosing husbands for their daughters when they are old enough to do that by themselves. This is why the menace of divorce is on the high side in Nigeria now. Perhaps it is because of the fact that globalization is reloading into our youths a new catalogue of values, few of them elevating and most of them devastating in nature. On the global terrain, plenty values are being churned out from Europe, America, Asia and we, in Africa, are busy with their impact and effects. One contemplates whether this phenomenon is really yielding good results for the war against gender inequality that is being fought. Okon cited by Onogu Sunday Williams (167) points out that “globalization still exacerbates gender inequality” both culturally and through loss of control to global pressures, and economically – through marginalization of women in jobs. This inequality is quite evident in Africa even in the face of globalization that one expects the success recorded in the advanced world to be extended to Africa. African women are still oppressed and marginalized when they should enjoy if the phenomenon is anything to go by. The men are still holding their traditional positions in the society and will not surrender the rights and freedoms that are entitled to women.

6.0 Conclusion

The issues that gender inequality has occasioned which includes oppression, marginalization, relegation, subjugation and mistreatment of the female folk is still a contemporary reality. Alachi has demonstrated how this ugly situation can be changed through his aptly constructed play, *Enekole*. This is in spite of the fact that he is a male playwright and there are quite few of them with such audacity of creative acumen. Other male playwrights who are still waxing stronger in the business of maintaining the male dominated status quo need to redirect their creative energies toward ensuring a gender sensitive and equal Africa.

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