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Problematic Gendering and Obnoxious Cultural Practices in Modern Drama (in Modern African Drama)

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Abstract: Harmful cultural practices especially those targeted against women are the major discourses against the traditional African society. Harmful traditional practices like female circumcision otherwise known as female genital mutilation, forced marriages, domestic violence, sacrifice of women to a deity to mention but a few are some of the traditional cultural practices that have held sway in African society for a long. The campaign to stop these practices has been ongoing for a while in the continent; laudable progress has been made yet these harmful cultural practices are not completely abolished. Many committed playwrights in African are aware of the need for the abolishment of these practices and have made themes based on these harmful practices re-occurring decimals in their works. It is in view of this that this paper evaluates the harmful cultural practices depicted in the plays: *A Scar for Life* by Barclays Ayokoroma and *The Wives' Revolt* by J.P Clark. The *Queer Theory* as coined by Teresa de Lauretis is suggested and applied as a possible panacea that addresses the problems and challenges the female characters in the selected plays suffer.

Keywords: Panacea, Culture, Circumcision & Practices.

1. Introduction

It is widely believed that drama has the ability to stimulate change in the society. Drama is viewed as a vehicle through which the culture of a people can be propelled, sustained and transmitted. Adeoye agrees with this when he describes Olu Obafemi's play; *Dark Times are Over* thus, "The cultural contexts of Olu Obafemi's *Dark Times Are Over* are numerous. The play celebrates the negative and positive forces within the Nigerian socio-cultural, religio-political and judicial institutions. This play thus can be interpreted as the writer's response to the degeneration of the Nigerian society to the state of lawlessness" (55). Beyond functioning as a tool for cultural change drama also reflects the social realities inherent in a society and in many instances can stimulation change through social commentaries, Okeke believes that, "as the watchdog of society uses drama as a tool to affect changes in his environment through his works, the dramatist aims at showing how things stand in his own

society” (112). From the foregoing appears that drama has the ability to stimulation change in the society and therefore can be used as a veritable tool to agitate against harmful cultural practices and also advocate for the emancipation of all the people being dehumanised as a result of the some of the obnoxious cultural practices inherent in the African society.

In African, there are many obnoxious cultural practices that have been ongoing for many years. Some are abolished while some are still practiced. Gender issues have remains problematic in the African society. Many aspects of African culture arguable do perpetuate harmful cultural practices that are gender based. Women are the most affected and dehumanised by these harmful cultural practices. Some of these harmful cultural do lots of damages to the victim physical, psychological, health wise and otherwise. According to Nwammuo, “Cultural practices and traditional beliefs of some ethnic/groups in Nigeria do not promote the empowerment of women but rather tend to oppress them. The belief in male dominance and female subordination, female genital mutilation (FGM), Harmful widowhood rites, early marriage of the girl-child, superstitious beliefs against equality, etc are just few of them” (184). Patriarchy is a very popular social system in the African society that encourages cultural practices like male dominance over women. The right of women even within and outside marriage are not protected. The crux of this paper is the identification some of the obnoxious gender cultural practices that are harmful to some gender within the African society and the impacts and implications of such as reflected in the plays; *A Scar for Life* by Barclays Ayokoroma and *The Wives’ Revolt* by J.P Clark. This research further suggests the *Queer Theory* as coined and propounded by Teresa de Lauretis as possible panacea that can stimulation cultural change and also bring about emancipation of all the affected characters in the plays understudy. *Queer Theory* is applied here where the feminist theory seems to be unable to perform much in term of complete gender marginalisation as contained in many cultures in African. The need to emancipate all gender from all forms of oppression starts with the realisation that gender is formed alongside social construct. The right to make basic life decision and be fully integrated in the polity of the society without any form of stigmatization are some of the positions of *Queer Theory* that gives impetus to this paper to adopting the theory as possible panacea to readdress the cauldron of contractions about gender and gender roles expectation in the African society.

2. Theoretical Framework

According to Tamsin,

Queer theory is not a singular or systematic conceptual or methodological framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire. If queer theory is a school of thought, then it’s one with a highly unorthodox view of discipline. The term describes a diverse range of critical practices and priorities: readings of the representation of same-sex desire in literary texts, films, music, images; analyses of the social and political power relations of sexuality; critiques of the sex-gender system; studies of transsexual and transgender identification, of sadomasochism and of transgressive desires (9).

It is apparent that *Queer Theory* is an off shoot from the gay/lesbian studies. The theory appears to be very apt in the gay/lesbian studies. The theory according to Jeanine Ruhsam “follows and expands upon feminist theory by refusing the belief that sexuality and gender identity are essentialist categories determined by biology that can thus be empirically judged by fixed standards of morality and “truth.”” (n.p). This theory is being applied in this paper not as a bane for gay/lesbian studies but as a veritable apparatus that can be used to re-evaluate the rights of any gender in the marriage institution and thus agitate for gender emancipation from all forms of harmful cultural practices. It is important to note that women are not the only victims of harmful cultural practices. Klages is of the opinion that “while gay/lesbian studies, as the name implies, focused largely on questions of homosexuality, *Queer Theory* expands its realm of investigation. *Queer Theory* looks at, and studies, and has a political critique of, anything that falls into normative and deviant categories” (n.p). The two categories in the society – normative and deviant could be explained as the societal norm labelling some cultural practices “normal,” and automatically set up its opposite, a category labelled “deviant,” and the implication is that specific acts or identities which fill those categories then get linked to other forms of social

practices and methods of social control. The harmful cultural practices like female genital mutilation are labelled normal in many African societies and any resistance by the female folk to resist it is labelled as deviant and consequences of such disobedience to the normative laws are bindings to the offenders in the society.

It is within this premise of the *Queer Theory* that this paper applies the *Queer Theory* as panacea for the emancipation of all sexes from the fangs of harmful cultural practices as contained in the dramatic literature understudy.

3. Harmful Cultural Practices and Gender Construct in Ayakoroma's *A Scar for Life* and Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*.

In many African societies, Nigeria inclusive gender is constructed alongside stipulated established and stipulated societal norms structured within the confines of gender roles. Any attempt by citizens to construct gender identities outside the culture and gender role stipulations in the society is labelled deviant. Strebel et al state in the finding from their quantitative research; "Social constructions of gender roles, gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS in two communities of the Western Cape, South Africa" that "among all key informants there was clear recognition of the pervasiveness of traditional gender roles in communities, which involve women staying at home to raise the family and men going out to work to provide for the family. In addition, women were expected by men to be submissive to their husbands, and men were expected to be the decision-makers" (518). This culture arguably has encouraged many harmful cultural practices in African especially against the female gender. Women in marriage sometimes appear to be more a victim of dehumanisation based on harmful traditions. This section creates a nexus between the harmful cultural practices inherent in *A Scar for Life* by Ayakoroma and *The Wives' Revolt* by Clark and further suggests *Queer Theory* as possible rationale for the emancipation of all affected by harmful cultural practices.

In *A Scar of Life*, the playwright depicts an obnoxious cultural practice in modern day living in Nigeria and the consequence of such abuse on the affected gender. Amaere the major female character in the play is forcefully made to be circumcised in her pregnancy. The society represented in the play believes that what qualifies a person to be fully identified as a woman is the person's ability to fulfil the circumcision rites. Gender construct to a large extent in the African society represented in the play is constructed alongside harmful cultural practice. When Amaere's husband – Akposeiye tried to object on behalf of his wife when this mother raised the issue of Amaere being circumcised since she is now pregnant; Mama retorts thus: "oh oh oh! So, township life has entered your head so much that you no longer know t what you are to circumcise your wife before she gives birth" (Ayakoroma 27). From Mama's comment, it is perhaps obvious that modernisation is a reality in the society where the play sets the inherent action in the play yet such harmful cultural practices like female circumcision at adulthood is accepted as normal in the society. Mama finds justification for her desperation to get her daughter circumcised in the following lines, "it is today they now know that circumcision is not good for a girl; is that not so? You know when a girl is not circumcised and she gives birth to a child, that child will not be a good child"(Ayakoroma 27). Every attempt by Akposeiye to make her mother come to term that such harmful cultural practice like female circumcision is no longer acceptable in contemporary times; Mama stood her ground and affirms her position thus

Understand what? The world has changes how? Let me tell you... when you don't circumcise a girl, she will sleep with men anyhow. She will like to meet a man outside even when she is married. Every time she gets up, she will not know herself again, because she cannot control it. But when you cut it, she will stay *kirun* in her husband's house, and enjoy her husband. It is forbidden for a girl to born when she has not been circumcised. Most times, the child will not stay alive because before she born am, her thing don cover the child's nose as the baby is coming out. When you manage and bring that baby out, it will cry nge nge nge, because it would have been tires as it was not able to breathe well. Even the child survives; it will not be a freeborn in the family (Ayakoroma 28-29).

The above explanation of the cultural stipulation was enough to convince Akposeiye that his pregnant need to be circumcised before she delivers her baby. Circumcision in this instance becomes the "normative" as stipulated in the *Queer Theory*. Anyone who tries to act otherwise is a defiant and

the “deviant” suffers the consequences of the breaking the custom. Klages in explaining the *Queer Theory* maintains that, “when you do something your culture labels deviant, you are liable to be punished for it: by being arrested, by being shamed, made to feel dirty, by losing your job, your license, your loved ones, your self-respect, your health insurance. Gay/lesbian studies, like feminist studies, works to understand how these categories of normal and deviant are constructed, how they operate, how they are enforced, in order to intervene into changing or ending them” (n.p).

Amaere who attempts to defend herself from the fangs of harmful cultural practice of circumcision becomes the defiant and she suffered the consequences. Her husband is the first person to dehumanise the pregnant woman. She expressed her surprise at her husband thus “Darling, I am surprised at your thinking. I mean, to talk of female genital mutilation at this level of your social development...” (Ayakoroma 34). The husband having been brainwashed by her mother immediately became an advocate for this harmful cultural practice. This is evident in the following lines.

Don't make it appear out of place. Circumcision is circumcision. All this talk about female genital mutilation or... or female genital cutting is to give genuine African custom and tradition a bad name and condemn it as barbaric. Our ancestors had good reasons for doing it; there is actually nothing wrong with it. (Ayakoroma 34)

All efforts by Amaere to make her husband see reasons with her are futile. She tries to lay claims on her right as a person to make her own decision in the following conversation from the play

Amaere: There is much to quarrel about! I will not allow you to take decisions over my head, just like that. I am not your personal property or possession that you can treat the way you like.

Akposeiye: Now keep quiet and listen to me! I married you in this house; I paid so much as bride price on your head! That makes you my personal property.

The above conversation is clear indication that the female is constructed alongside lots of social expectations in Nigeria and many part of Africa. Schalkwyk might have been aware of this when he posits that

Expectations about attributes and behaviours appropriate to women or men and about the relations between women and men – in other words, gender – are shaped by culture. Gender identities and gender relations are critical aspects of culture because they shape the way daily life is lived in the family, but also in the wider community and the workplace. Gender (like race or ethnicity) functions as an organizing principle for society because of the cultural meanings given to being male or female. This is evident in the division of labour according to gender. In most societies there are clear patterns of “women’s work” and “men’s work,” both in the household and in the wider community – and cultural explanations of why this should be so. The patterns and the explanations differ among societies and change over time. (1)

From the foregoing it is apparent that one of the gender expectations of women in African is to completely yield themselves in obedience to their husbands. This explains why Akposeiye who perceives the approach of his wife to the culture as “deviant” deems it fit to domestically violent her by beating her up. The heartbreaking situation about this is that Amaere parents’ finds justification in her husband actions because once they are concerned she has is operating outside the premises of the “normative ideals” of the society and therefore she deserves whatever consequences. This cultural practice is highly provocative and this is why this paper agitates that instead of channelling the Queer Theory to agitate for the gay/lesbian right, it could be first to use to as palliative for gender-based violence practiced in the African culture.

Amaere ran home to her parent erroneously thinking that she will be protected from the harmful cultural practice of genital mutilation. She was wrong because her parents became the arrow in the bow that rebounds to shoot the hunter. She and her sister were forcefully dragged into female circumcision by her own parents. Amaere narratives the ordeal she and her sister suffered in circumcision rites thus

That was how Deinere died. The doctors could not be of any help because they said i was too late. According to the autopsy report, she had suffered from intra-uteri infection, and the bleeding could not be controlled. They said even if she had survived, she would have been a VVF patient. For me, I eventually lost my baby because of the same intra-uteri

infection. Since then, I have not been able to get pregnant again. My menstrual periods have become very irregular (Ayakoroma 67).

The consequences of some of these harmful cultural practices are many. For instance, the health challenges that these practices brings on its victims would have been enough reason for the abolishment of this culture a long time ago. No wonder Ojua et al explains that

African societies and cultural practices over these years had commanded global attention as it concern health conditions of the people... The cultural practices of people not only affect their health but also affect all aspects of life including social relationships, contribution to societal functioning and disease condition. In Nigeria during circumcision, it is common practice to use cow-dung to clear the umbilical cord, this results in tetanus infection caused by a bacterium called “clostridium tetani” (176 and 179)

It is also “normative” in within the African culture to expect a woman to bear children. This explains why Akposeiye after all he made his wife Amaere to suffer; an act that has prevented her from fulfilling her gender role expecting of bearing children, he still went head to bring in another woman for marriage while banishing Amaere from his home. Where then is then is the right female in the African society? This research paper hopes to answer this question subsequently.

J.P. Clark in *The Wives' Revolt*, also present a society where harmful cultural practices are presented as “normative” and any attempt to rebel against these cultural practices will be labelled “deviant” and punished. In *The Wives Revolt*, Clark presents the patriarchal system in the community of Erhuwaren; a community in the south-south region of Nigeria, that perpetuates the subjugation and marginalisation of women economically, sociologically, psychologically and otherwise. The situation that led to the invocation of harmful cultural stipulation on the women is linked to the women’s rejection to the share formula for the oil compensation money given by the oil companies operating in their Land. The men have decided without consulting the women and shared the money into three; one share to the elders, another to the men and the last quarter to the women. These women reject the sharing formula and demand an equal share of the money since the elders getting the third part are still part of the men. The women in this instance have acted outside the “normative” social expectation. The culture does not permit women to challenge any decision taken by men and so these women are labelled “deviant”. To weaken the economic powers of these women, frustration their goals and to also stop them from taking action against the men a ban is placed on the rearing of goats, a domestic animal reared by these women. The rearing of this domestic animal and forms the backbone of these women’s source of income. Mfaga Modom and Asen Marcellinus capture and explain the situation thus,” ...women not being allowed to own property as seen in the banishment of the goat, which are owned and reared by women, their domestic value not also appreciated in the play, the elders of the society deciding an unfair and unequal share of the compensation money from the oil company” (168).

One interest approach Clark brings in this play is that he allowed the women to be deviants and challenge the laws that oppress them. This is approach is in conformity to the Queer Theory. It could appear very queer in the eyes of those men using the harmful culture for their selfish interest that these women could agitate for their emancipation. The question of who defines what is “normative” and “deviant” in the society arises. These women saw the need to negotiate their way of out of this marginalisation and dehumanisation yet they never adopted violence rather the created an avenue for peaceful dialogue which will consequently lead to a lasting solution to the conflict. They made initiations for a peaceful dialogue between them and the men. They remain resolute to their decision of perpetuating harmful cultural practices that dehumanise women. This is obvious in the following lines of Koko

Oh, yes, so we did. But did your most respected leader recognise our individual rights to speak? Oh, old age can really be a curse. Did you see him sliding off into sleep in the middle of the proceedings then, when nudged awake by his young attendant, how he nodded vigorously to everything you men said?(Clark 9)

Clark uses the character Koko to represent the voice of the women and Okoro her husband to represent that of the men in the play. The following conversation that ensures between them is a clear indication of the women use of negotiation and dialogue for their emancipation.

Koko: You have your free women from the streets all the time, anyway; when you ever waited for us to ban you from our beds before seeking comfort and company elsewhere? Our menstrual or pregnant condition used to be the excuse in the good old days but not so now

Okoro: I'm not going to be drawn into that old trap of an argument and be picked up by the tail like some wet rat out of a sewer. Oh, I should have known I would have nothing hostility and criticism from my own wife when I come home after doing a day's job for which I have had nothing but praise from everybody outside.

The foregoing are indications that the women tried to negotiate for their place in the costume of the land but their voices mean little or nothing to their male counterpart. These women through Koko stated that, "The law you have passed is bad, unfair and discriminatory, being direct against women because of our stand. We will not accept" (18). These women in their quest to establish themselves in the political and economic domain of their society also stage walk out or self impose exile. They headed and settled in the enemy's territory; land known for its filthiness.

Consequent upon the action of these women action is becomes obvious that they pursue a peaceful resolution of the crisis. The walk out by the women and the consequent effect of this walk out made the men to bring them back for a re-negotiation and settlement of the crisis. This singular action of the women brings the two warring parties to a point where both are willing to reach a compromise. The men did not only bring their wives home but also invested the compensation money wisely into education for the benefit of all and also share everything belong to the community equally between them and the women to forestall further occurrences, hired a team doctors to treat these women of the disease they contacted while on exile, revoke the ban on the rearing of goats, pay a reparation of fattened cow, the hundreds of heads of yam, ten barrels of palm oil and other items required to pacify these women and involve the women in the governance of the society.

The action of these women which previously is labelled "deviant" becomes a platform for the emancipation of these women. *The Queer Theory* which ordinary as the name implies stand for those behaviours that are not normal and not accepted in the society can really be applied to liberate the society because if the women had given in their queer approach to their emancipation the success they achieved would not have been possible. It is also important to note that negative implication of gender construct alongside gender role in African is enormous. If the women were not marginalised and dehumanised by their male counterpart, there will be no need for exile and consequently there will be not infection contacted.

4. Conclusion

Thus far, this paper has been able to demonstrate that there are many harmful cultural practices within the African society and these harmful cultural practices are re-occurring decimals in African dramatic literature. Many aspects of these harmful traditional practices are targeted against women. Also, the paper establishes that gender construct in many African societies are based on social expectations tilting towards gender roles. Gender roles therefore limit a woman and encourage male dominance in the society. *The Queer Theory* which this study takes further off from the premises of gay/lesbian right to a cultural realm where those behaviours labelled "deviant" could be an accepted stipulation in the culture by the custodians. The "deviant" could be an avenue for the emancipation and liberation all the marginalised and dehumanised. The "normative" codes in the society may not actually be normal since in its precepts pave for dehumanisation. The instance in Clark *The Wives' Revolt* illustrates this because the women who are deviants finally through the application of that which is considered queer in the society was able to achieve a new dawn in the polity and culture of the community represented in the play. More so, *A Scar for Life* does present the consequences and implications of harmful cultural practices which are conceived as "normative" in the society. The instance that culture must be adhered cost the life of Deinere and even if she did not die she was going to be a VVF patient. Also, Amaere lost her baby after suffering from intra-uteri infection from the circumcision the culture forcefully subjected her to. If both characters had remained deviants they would not have been victims of the situation they find themselves. That which is normal and acceptable in the eyes of the law at the tail end in the play; *A Scar for Life* becomes queer in the eyes

and that which is queer becomes normal hence *Queer Theory* as a panacea for harmful cultural practices in modern African drama.

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