

Gendered Female Characters in Ahmed Yerima's Tuti and Yemoja

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Abstract

Gender roles and their representation in literature have long been subjects of critical examination, particularly in the context of African societies where cultural norms deeply influence societal structures and individual identities. In African drama, the depiction of male and female characters often mirrors traditional gender expectations, which can reinforce existing stereotypes and perpetuate gender inequalities. This study aims to analyze the portrayal of female characters in Yerima's Tuti and Yemoja, focusing on the ways these characters reflect and resist traditional gender norms. By employing a modified psychoanalytical framework by Barbieri, the research seeks to uncover the underlying biases and cultural assumptions that shape these portrayals. Our findings reveal that in a bias society like Africa, women's beauty and education are threat and also seen as been proud. This study also reveals that a woman's kindness and motherly nature is used against him and term weakness as portrayed by Yerima, where Titubi's complementary role is challenged as taking up the responsibilities of her husband while Yemoja's kindhearted is portrayed as been seduction by Esu and her husband Ogun. The study not only contributes to the academic discourse on gender and literature but also advocates for more equitable and diverse representations of gender in African drama.

Keywords: Gender, psychoanalysis, Ahmed Yerima, Electra complex, Trauma.

Introduction

Gender discourse in literature has aroused so many debates and it is no gain saying that gender issues have become a matter of concern in so many fields especially literary works. This is because writers such as Juliet Mitchell, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone see that the male gender are celebrated and projected over the females. At the moment, critical reflections on gender issue among Africans is on the high side due to so many factors, amongst which western influence cannot be ignored. Another factor that influences the reflection of gender in play-texts is stated by Agaku (2006, p.120) that, "... dramatists' portrayal of these women was in consonance with the whim and caprices of the society in which they lived and wrote these plays". This implies that the society of a playwright influences his or her view and judgment of a gender over another. In African culture, from birth, importance is placed on a male child over the female child as a male child is said to be the one to carry the lineage of his family to another generation. Ewrierhoma (2014, p.137) sees gender as the role ascribed to females and males within socio-cultural contexts. This means that gender is a way of classifying human beings into two forms based on the biological and physical make up of an individual. Gender discourse matter cannot be ignored in literary works as both male and female seeks to project each other at the expense of another.

Subsequently, some female playwrights like, Irene Salami Agunloye, Zulu Sofola, Ama Ata Aido, Julie Okoh, amongst others who due to their educational exposure stands to defend the womanhood in their writings as against the negative portrayal of their gender by male playwrights in a male dominated world. They, therefore, tend to write plays that celebrate the female folks and educating other females of their worth beyond the domestic sector. For example, Agunloye (1998) cited in Agajku (2006, p. 120) insists that:

The problem appears in drama as a carryover from the larger society. The societies in most parts of the world see women as second-class citizen as such their portrayal in most works of literary art is seen in the negative perspective.

Agunloye's statement above expresses her displeasure on the negative portrayal of female gender especially among Africans which she sees as an unfair judgment of women. It is also observed in history that some women take a major role in saving their communities from major destruction. Examples of such women

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are Heroines like: Moremi who saved the people of Ife, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti who fought for the right of women to vote in Nigeria, to mention but few. In light of this, the paper seeks to analyse and describe the portrayal of female characters in the Ahmed Yerima's *Tuti* (2008) and *Yemoja* (2002).

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the theory of psychoanalysis as modified by Barbieri (1999). This modification came as a result of some observations in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory of 1910 in which Barbieri noted that emphasis was made on male gender over the female. Tracing the history of psycho - analysis of Sigmund Freud, Barbieri (1999, p.70) is of the view that:

Freud focuses on the analysis of the psycho behaviours of masculine gender explaining the sexuality drive as feelings of sexual pleasure experienced in human being especially the male gender towards the female. Freud further explained that the existence of female comes from what he called the penis envy that occurs in a male folks.

Drawing from the above, Barbieri calls for the need for gender consideration to be analytical as he worked on what is called psychosexual development where he stressed the gender theory, though the Electra and Oedipus complexes as discovered by Freud. The Electra complex is a situation where a female child develops certain intimate feelings with her father, and in the process, sees her mother as a threat. Oedipus complex on the other hand, occurs when a male child develops intimate feelings with her mother, thereby seeing his father as a threat to them.

Gender is defined by Lindsey (1997, p.89) as what societies and individual ascribe to male and female categories: gender theory analyses that every child is born by a female gender and such child tends to love her/her mother from birth till a year old, before he/she tends to realise that there is need to emanate someone who is same gender with him/her. Barbieri (1999, p.57) further explains that "a girl adopted a primary feminine position as the girl tends to see her mother as mentor because of their gender similarity therefore she tends to act like her in behaviour". Likewise, a male child becoming conscious of his muscles, looks up to his father as mentor and exhibit his behaviour unconsciously. He also analyses cultural influence that affects gender as he views that a culture tends to elevates male over female, but forgetting that every child is delivered by a female gender therefore a female gender needs not to be ignored or restricted by cultural taboo that affects active participation in the socio-cultural and eco-political sectors of the society. This theory is adopted for this study because it enables the researchers to analyse the roles given to female characters in the selected play-texts. Noteworthy, the following are the strengths of modified psychoanalytical theory as relevant to this study:

- I. It allows us to examine the individual based on gender influence, roles and expectations;
- II. It conceives the human mind as a laboratory for examination and cross-examination;
- III. It helps in understanding gender differences.

It must be mentioned however, that one major weakness of this theory is that it elevates a gender over another. More so, the theory focuses on one particular person at a time, reducing in the process, its ability to have a wider coverage and effective gender balancing. Hence, this study examines gender issues in the characters of Tutibi in *Tuti* and Yemoja in *Yemoja*.

Conceptual Clarifications and Discourse on Gendered Role

In history, drama is believed to have started from Greece in the worship of a god known as Dionysus god of fertility. Great dramatists known in this period include: Sophocles, Aeschylus and Aristophanes but from this, it is observed that they are male. The female roles are being acted out by the males though costumes are used to differentiate gender acting on stage to the audience. This implies that from the existence of

drama, restriction has been placed on female gender as they are limited in participation. It is also observed in the Holy Bible that:

He formed a woman out of the rib and brought her to him. Then the man said, “at last, here is some of my own kind, bone taken from my bone, and flesh from my flesh “woman is her name because she was taken out of man” (Genesis 2:23, Good News Translation).

Thus, this statement implies that the first gender that existed is man and so God gave him a helper who is a female to assist him in what God has created him to do. The fact that the clamour for female gender recognition gave birth to theories such as feminism, womanism and sexism to mention but few, cannot be overemphasised. For example, Hein (1990, p. 280) explains that “Feminism creates new ways of thinking, new meanings and new categories of critical reflection”. She further expatiates that:

Feminism does not pertain to women as the objects of love or hatred, or even of social (in justice), but fixes upon the perspective that women bring to experience as subjects, a perspective whose existence has heretofore been ignored. (Cited in Arinomo 2018, p. 232).

This shows that feminism seeks to tell more on females as an important being in the society. Although among some females especially in Africa, feminism seems not to be welcomed because it is considered a white phenomenon. African women see it as a threat to their cultural belief on their roles to their husband and society. This gave birth to “Womanism”, which, according to Ogini (1996, p.14), “desires that man and woman should be in harmony in the home and in the society at large”.

It is worthy of note that, “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” (Embu, 2009, p. 238). The submission from Embu (2009) implies that, Nigerian women advocate for equal active participation with their male counterparts. It is recorded by Akinwunmi (2017, p.184) that it is during the 1980s that “the emergence of female voices in the genre of Nigeria drama and some of the prominent writers known are Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme and Stella Oyedepo” came to be pronounced. These playwrights reflect the theme of inequality and injustice in their works concerning the female folks. The writing of these females awakened other female scholars to see the necessity of them to be educated, be free from cultural influences in order to attain and make a positive impact in their society. Gender roles, according to Ogboni (2015, p. 384)

vary widely between cultures and even in the same cultural tradition have differed over time and context. There are differences of opinion as to which observed differences in behavior and personality between genders are entirely due to innate personality of the person and which are due to cultural or social factors, and are therefore the product of socialization, or to what extent gender differences are due to biological and physiological differences.

Ogboni’s (2015, p. 384), submission explains that gender roles ascribe to an individual varies from one culture to another. Gender role discussion also cut-across other field of studies such as sociology as it is noted in one of their cliffs note below:

Gender roles adopted during childhood normally continue into adulthood. At home, people have certain presumptions about decision-making, child rearing practices, financial responsibilities, at work, people also have presumptions about power, the division of labour and organisational structures. None of this is meant to imply that gender roles, in and of themselves, are good or bad, they merely exist. Gender roles are realities in almost everyone’s life.

The statement above explains that gender role is always observed by an individual and it is learnt from a child’s early life to adulthood. Though, sometimes situations around an individual could dictate the role a person plays. It is noted that African feminists are not seeking a means of dominating the male gender, but they are postulating leverage above their domestic roles. Nnaemeka (2007) cited in Yeseibo (2015, p. 609) attests to this position that:

For women, the male is not the other but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself to constitute a unit by itself each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own. Sexual differences and similarities, as well as sex roles, enhance sexual autonomy and cooperation between women and men, rather than promote polarization and fragmentation. Within the metaphysical realm, both male and female principles encompass life and operate jointly to maintain cosmological balance.

This explains that each gender should see each other as a complement as they agree to project each other well. They both have a role to perform as humans in the society and in the process, there should not be a bias in their performance.

Synopsis of Ahmed Yerima's Yemoja

The play dramatises the interplay among selected Yoruba gods such as Esu, Ogun, Obatala and Yemoja. Ogun and Yemoja are in a relationship, but Esu, who happens to be a close friend of Ogun wants to have Yemoja to himself, though he hides his feelings from Ogun. One day, Ogun prepares to go for a war and he requests that his Friend, Esu should look after his wife while he is at war which Esu agrees. Esu tries to seize this opportunity to win Yemoja's heart but fails. His cunning nature thinks by deceiving Yemoja's to open the calabash Ogun warns her not too open for his protection at war, whatever consequences that befalls her will make her love him but he fails too. Rather, Yemoja obeys and loses her leg, Esu seeks the help of Obatala to cure Yemoja. As Obatala does his work of healing on her, Esu becomes jealous of Yemoja's gestures to Obatala. He takes a trip to Ogun to inform him that Yemoja is cheating on him. Ogun is furious and he rushes back home only to meet Obatala drunk. Ogun desires to kill him but Esu pleads that they should fix a day to fight before the people. This disagreement between Ogun and Obatala makes Yemoja to worry and she consults Orunmila on what to do to prevent the fight but Orunmila rather gives a prophecy that Yemoja will become a river in two days.

Synopsis of Ahmed Yerima's Tuti

The story centers on a lady known as Tuti who has a father to look after and no mother. Her father has been diagnosed with cancer and chronic asthma and he has limited days to spend but Tuti tries to make everything right with her father before he dies. Tuti is married but she does major responsibilities at home such as paying the house rent and school fees because her husband has no job. Tuti's father sees her responsibility as taking over a man's work and rendering her husband powerless. He advises that if she does not do something about this, she will lose everything and, in the process, die untimely. Tuti tries to ask her father concerning the allegation from the church over mismanagement of God's money which he confesses that he actually stole some church money to sponsor her to school in The United States. Tuti feels bad but happy that she has been able to pay back the estimated amount stolen from the church. She reconciles with her father and wants to have a walk with him. She rushes to get the door as she hears a door bell. Her husband informs her that her father has been hit by a car and that he is dead. Alas, it is her father's ghost she has been conversing with all the while in the house as she even gets more confused.

Ahmed Yerima's Portrayal of Gendered Character in Yemoja

The title of the play "Yemoja" reveals that it centres on a goddess in the Yoruba cosmology. That name is ascribed to a river, though among Africans, there are many stories that surrounds the goddess, but they all agree that she turned into a river. This goddess is known to be generous in giving children to those who are barren and solving people's needs. The playwright has also done a just work on this deity by taking us through history and giving awareness of the gods in this generation. In the play, the playwright places Yemoja who is the central character, in certain precarious situations and her reactions to these situations are not suitable about the gender being projected. The first circumstance is reflected in the excerpt below:

Esu: don't give me any moral rubbish. I did not force her, did I? I only said she may... and the woman in her took over, so leave me alone Olohun-iyó. (Yerima, 2002, p.30)

This statement is made when Esu tries to convince Yemoja to go against the wish of Ogun who informs her not to open the calabash of life given to her. The excerpt above portrays women as gullible. The expression, “woman in her took over” reveals that the playwright has successfully showcased women as soft-hearted and people that can be easily influenced to go against their wish when pressure is mounted on them.

Another line in the play that also describes the gender role is seen when Yemoja opens the calabash against the wish of Ogun but becomes cripple and Obatala is consulted for healing. In the course of the healing process, Esu takes Yemoja’s reactions to the therapy as an act of seduction. The lines below reflect it:

Esu: ... can Yemoja be so cheap?

Could she have fallen for Obatala’s gentle touch?

She should be in pain

Not laughing... at what? ...

Her pupils fell gently on Obatala

... ha Obatala massages her naked legs and she enjoys it.

My ego crashes, crumbles again and I am in pain, yet she enjoys it (Yerima, 2002, p. 36)

Esu’s attempt to have Yemoja to himself explains his behaviour and the presence of psychosexual drive in every human being which is the desire to have sexual pleasure from opposite sex. As Esu did not achieve what he wants, his anger makes him seek all means for Yemoja to be in trouble with her husband. This is why he decides to lie to Ogun that Yemoja is having an affair with Obatala. At Ogun’s returns, he meets Yemoja and Obatala dancing together. He becomes furious and calls Obatala to a fight. He loses the trust in his wife and this incidence makes her to seek trust in Orumila:

Yemoja: Baba, I swear by Olodumare, Obatala means nothing to me. He was kind to me and I showed him hospitality in return, that was all, baba.

Yemoja: baba, help him. Don’t let Ogun drag his name into Esu’s shameful mud (Yerima, 2002, p. 47).

The excerpts above also shows that a woman is seen as a sex toy, that do not have self-control when it comes to sexual urge. The conversation above also displays the experience of a hurt woman whose husband’s mistrust, despite her love for him. The playwright makes Yemoja in this situation miserable due to the reaction of a male gender, Ogun. She now has no confidence in herself.

The statement made by Orumila below over the beauty of Yemoja reflects that when a woman is beautiful, then she is naturally subjected to unpleasant situations from the male gender. She becomes objects of molestation, and prey in the hands of the opposite sex. Obatala expresses his feelings and states his confusion or rather infatuation over Yemoja’s beauty despite knowing that she is married. Thus:

Orumila: ... Your beauty gives me a headache, Yemoja.

Yemoja: It is not my fault, Baba. If Olodumare decides to give me my beauty, I cannot help it, if men cannot control themselves. Baba, do what I have begged you to and leave my beauty alone (Yerima, 2002, p. 48).

In the play, Yemoja is a female character who plays the role of a goddess as given by the playwright, but her gender is exposed to some unpleasant situation in the play. The researcher is of the view that the female

gender is not well celebrated in the play. Rather, Yemoja is projected as a woman who needs male positive judgment of herself before she can see life as meaningful. Yemoja's experiences are manifested in the form of lack of trust and misconception of her hospitality.

The Gendered Roles in Ahmed Yerima's Tuti

The roles of Tuti in the play are presented in many ways. Firstly, she is projected as a hardworking woman who seeks to provide for her family at all costs, as reflected in her lines below:

Tuti: ... hello Hellen. Please cancel all my appointments today. I am with my father. Let Henry go to court and take a new date... make all the salary payments to the staff. And do not forget to send the cheque for my son's school fees. Pay off the house maid, too. Give her some money, she needs to go to the market later ... (Yerima, 2008, p.15)

Tuti's hardworking nature in the play is ridiculed by his father which is evidenced in one of his lines:

Father: He has a lot, my dear, he is a man with his ego and pride, and you choose to marry him remember? Him and all his limitations and liabilities. You, Titubi Johnson, A senior Advocate of Nigeria chose the loafer, so give him back his pride. (Yerima, 2008, p.23)

At this point, the playwright portrays that no matter the qualification of women, there is a restriction on their duty(ies) being discharged especially in terms of provision for the home. Once this role is performed by a female, it is seen as her taking charge of the home.

The playwright also projects that there should be a limit to a female's achievements in order to make such gender available for marriage proposal from men. In the play, Tuti claims to have married the wrong man because she married out of desperation and fear of being without a husband after the pursuit of her academic career. The situation most educated female encounters. Where men see highly educated female as threats to their existence because of the fear of not being submissive and taking over the male roles and responsibilities. This reflects in her lines that:

Tuti: that is where I got caught up. The cliché. But the more I got educated there were very few good men left to choose from. In your male dominated world, men make the choices, remember? I, in my desperation, found Ayo... (Yerima, 2008, p.17)

The playwright also reflects the Elcetra complex that occurs in a girl child towards the father as Tuti expresses her love to the father below:

Tuti: The one I have known all my life. The one whose voice woke me up in the morning and sent me to sleep even when I was in my mother's womb ... the man I first felt real love for. The man I adored as a teenager. Who bought me my first gifts. My pillar of strength, my security. You know, Papa, I used to dream of marrying him. I was jealous of my mother, because she had his love and attention, until I was told daughters don't marry their fathers ... (Yerima, 2008, p. 25)

Also, readers are faced with the negative portrayal female gender as the death of Tuti's mother was narrated by her daughter below:

Tuti: She died broken-hearted. The man she had loved all her life with one stroke had shattered all the love, the image of trust and bond. With one stroke, she had a stroke, fell into coma and died. (Yerima, 2008, p 40)

The mother's death was caused due to the behaviour of a male gender in which she lost her sanity to the point of being in comma due to her husband's bad behaviour to her. As said by Tuti "in one stroke" which in all indication, a stroke is not supposed to kill a human but because she is a woman who has been portrayed as been fragile and weak "one stroke" sent her "into coma and died". This is the general believe of the

society especially in Africa. Nobody seems to be talking about the emotional trauma, pains, rigours of anguish she must have passed through having a rigid man as a husband.

The two plays are written at different times, but the portrayal of gender role of these women was unfolded. Yemoja addresses historical issues going by the Yoruba belief in gods and women's roles. Despite being a god, Yemoja is not exempted from that portrayal of fragile, weak and feminine picture. This reflects in Yemoja as she longs for her husband's care, but Ogun prefers yielding to the call of war because of his class and his masculine portrayal of strength. Furthermore, Yemoja has no influence on him going against his wish because the Yoruba believes that the wish of a husband overrides that of his wife. On the other hand, *Tuti* addresses the contemporary issues of the African woman in term of their exposure to education, pursuit of career and their yearning for a better view of the female gender at the expense of their family which reflects in Tuti's character.

Comparative Discourse of Ahmed Yerima's Yemoja and Tuti

Ahmed Yerima's *Yemoja* and *Tuti* have comparative grounds which show their differences and similarities. To begin with, the plot of the two plays exposes us to two different periods and settings. In *Yemoja*, the play opens with the chanting and praises of Yemoja, which symbolises her as a heroine in the African traditional setting. As a goddess, it is believed that she brings good fortune to people which the playwright celebrates through her compassionate heart, loving and accommodating spirit which is typical of the female gender. In *Tuti*, a contemporary society is showcased as Tuti takes care of her father explaining to him the report from the doctor concerning his health and how unhappy she is over the father's health and negligence.

Also, the issue of women as second-class citizen is put to play as the men are seen as the unquestionable and superior beings. In *Yemoja* for example, it is revealed when Yemoja pleads with Ogun:

Yemoja: go, if you must Ogun,

But don't leave me unprotected ... (Yerima, 2002, p. 20)

Ogun: ... is that all

Howu, Yemoja ...

Esu my trusted friend will see to that (Yerima, 2002, p. 20)

Yemoja: ho oo! That devil of a man. Don't call him ...

Ogun: Esu is not a devil of a man...

Esu is good, Esu is my great friend ... (Yerima, 2002, p. 21)

Ogun's decision in bringing Esu overrides the wish of Yemoja. This also reflects in *Tuti* as the major characters' hard work is projected in the play, but it is taken as projection of ego from the masculine angle.

In the two play texts, women are projected as victims of men's behaviour. In *Tuti*, Tuti's mother's death is an outcome of her husband's negative behaviour. Firstly, she becomes a drunk, then, takes ill and goes into coma for a while before she dies. In *Yemoja*, Ogun's insistence on a fight with Obatala over wrong accusation of Yemoja having an affair with Obatala results in Yemoja seeking to become a river. This she sees as the best way of escaping Ogun's wrath.

Again, the use of language in the play-texts shows the societal view of the female gender who is seen as inferior. In *Yemoja*, Esu uses his cunning ways to convince Yemoja over opening the calabash of life given to her by Ogun:

Esu: ... I only said she may ... and the woman in her took over. (Yerima, 2002, p.

23)

This line from *Yemoja* enables readers to see the female gender through the female characters from a negative perspective. Through language, the playwright portrays them as gullible and weak whose situation dictates their actions. The case in *Tuti* is similar but not the same. The father's statement when Tuti expresses her concern over the responsibilities she is shouldering is a bit derogatory and at the same time, the comment shows Tuti as a woman of strength whom Walker (1984, p. xii) sees as being womanish in nature:

Tuti: and now... with child... an ailing old father, a busy job and ... a loafer for

Husband... I don't know any more (she begins to cry) it is too much for me.

Father: ha, there you go, you are a woman after all. Please, stop crying. Like all

women must you always end a good discussion with tears? (Yerima, 2008, p. 23)

The comment from Tuti's father above portrays women as fragile, who should not be a burden bearer because to Tuti's father, it is more like a competition and not seen as complementing roles also, the female is seen as a gender whose only expression of joy and displeasure is through shedding of tears. Readers should however, note that at one point in time, every human being shed tears for one reason or the other.

Conclusion

The paper reveals that the female genders in Ahmed Yerima's selected plays, *Yemoja*, *Tuti* and *Tuti's mother* are projected as subject to the male folks. It is also discovered that the gender of the playwright influences the situation he puts the characters in his plays. This reveals that African playwrights are influenced by the African culture which unconsciously makes them to be gender bias in their works and to go in line with societal and cultural expectations. The paper also brings to the fore the conditions of some homes in the society as women go through unpleasant condition and different forms of abuse because they are successful in their career as seen in the character of Tuti. Such women are labeled by the patriarchal society as being tough, arrogant and uncontrollable as such women tend to control the home and wherever they find themselves. This paper concludes that while Yerima tries to celebrate the female gender in his plays, the language, characterisation and cultural views given to them reflects his gender bias as expected of the socio-cultural beliefs of most male playwrights in an essentially patriarchal society.

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