



A House Divided Against Itself: A Feminist Critique of Andrew Dosunmu's *Mother of George*

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ABSTRACT

Feminist critical standpoint has, unarguably, propelled the articulation of a reliable model to interrogate the perceived inhuman treatment allegedly meted out to women in the patriarchal social order. Apparently influenced by the west, it has distilled its polemic to investigate the injustice across the globe as if Africa is an appendage of Europe and America!. This has had untoward consequences for the advancement of a developmental model for non-western society. Besides, its treatise has unconvincingly advocated for the reversal of the natural order since it perceived men as enemies to be 'crushed' in the quest for an egalitarian society. This paper rethinks this argument. It seeks for an indigenous gender-biased theory, which is enshrined in African worldview, for the amelioration of injustice in the society. It, however, jettisons the call for the reversal of role as it is an anathema to the dictate of nature. Instead, it supports the complimentary of role from both sexes.

Key words: Feminist critical standpoint, patriarchal, Africa, egalitarian society, theory.

INTRODUCTION

Mother of George is an African film which centres on the challenges faced by a typical childless African woman (wife). With a diaspora setting at the surface, it has a connotative impression of English origin. This is evident in its title, setting and the medium of communication which is a mixture of the English and Yoruba Languages. This is not inadvertent but consequent on its foregrounded intention to bring to the fore the versatility of the two cultures that are the focus of the film. Adenike, a Yoruba girl of a good background, is betrothed to the family of Ayodele, in the absence of the latter. This is in consonance with a quintessential Yoruba culture where marriage is contracted between families with or without the consent of the intending couples. A typical traditional Yoruba marriage rite reiterates family consent before a marriage is contracted. Invariably, a Yoruba wife is not the sole possession of the husband. Rather her commitment is to the larger family of her husband which explains the limitless influence couples have (especially the husband) over a marriage in Yoruba land. As culturally sanctioned, the choice and decision of both parties may sometimes be sacrificed on the altar of culture, especially if childlessness (like the case of the couple) is the issue.

Although Adenike has a misgiving about the social implication of Ayodele's absence at their supposedly engagement ceremony, she takes solace in the euphoria of her impending sojourn in America to join him. Her sense of reasoning has been beclouded by the lure of 'anticipated' wealth and social reputation of travelling to America. The hostile socio-economic climate in Nigeria has impacted negatively onto the young lady who now seeks the golden fleece abroad though the implication of Ayodele's (absence at his wedding) would later dawn on her as evident in his uncooperative attitude with the effort of the wife for solution to her childlessness. He has avoidably absents himself from home under the pretext of working to earn a better living for the family. In his postmodern world, pecuniary consideration is preferred above institutional nuances! He later seeks succor in the bosom of Adenike's best friend. Traditionally in Yoruba land, the men do the hunting while the women (wife to be) are the hunted. As soon as the union is

contracted, the reverse is the case as the woman is culturally sanctioned to be subservient and ‘worship’ her husband. This explains why a seemingly happy home suddenly turns the other way.

In *Mother of George*, the reality of Adenike’s childless situation torments her to no end. After a visit to several hospitals could not solve her problem of childlessness, she becomes an object of ridicule, a social outcast of a sort. As if the lack of understanding of her husband is a child’s play, her mother-in-law, unto whom she was handed-over after the marriage rites, becomes her Achilles’ heel. The former has become a thorn in her flesh for her consistent insistence on “carrying her grandson.” Adenike is, therefore, hooked between two devils, - the husband and the mother-in-law.

In Africa, childlessness is frowned at and any childless marriage can be viewed from different negative perspectives ranging from cultural to spiritual violation of norms and conventions. The wife is always “guilty as charged” as an underlying suggestion of a “misused” youthful period is rife. Although it is a truism that children are the joy of marriages, Africans attached so much importance to the fruit of the womb such that a woman who fails to bear children is considered a failure in marriage. Ironically, woe betides a woman who does not have a male child for her husband. This is so because procreation is seen as a continuation of genealogy, and a male child is preferred to project the family name. Hence the absence of a male child is frowned at, let alone a woman without child. However, the changing reality of events over time has casted aspersion over the insistence on a male child. With the right education and exposure, women have continued to hold their own in all positions and professions which, hitherto used to be the exclusive preserve of men. Besides, no aspect of Nigeria’s law inhibits a woman from aspiring to any position of authority. The cultural inhibition has been relegated to the background in the age of civilization.

In fairness to the mother-in-law who symbolizes cultural stereotype, she tows the line of tradition to proffer solution to the couple’s plight. As worthy of condemnation as her attitude is, her action can be positively interpreted to imply that of a resilient mother who does all within her capacity to defend, protect and support a son who is faced with a challenge that looks insurmountable. At time, she is persuasive, at time domineering and abusive. She finally convinces Adenike to engage in diverse spiritual engagements ranging from drinking of concoction to spiritual fortification and appeasement as against her wish. It is the failure of the various efforts that suggested the unthinkable. As a custodian of culture, the mother-in-law needs not be told that in Africa, especially in Yoruba land, to every action there is always a reaction. Hence, the realization of the grievous aftermath of deviant or abominable tendencies should have prevented the mother-in-law from suggesting the abominable.

Meanwhile, the mother-in-law’s options of solution could have been better than that of the younger brother of Ayodele making babies with Adenike in place of his brother. As culturally acceptable as this may be, it takes the death of an elder brother for the wife to be willed to the younger brother. Infact, the younger brother is said to have inherited the wife alongside other properties of the deceased that might have been transferred/willed given to him. The justifiability of this exercise is in the fact that it is a common practice intended to foster the continuation of the common bond within the family since a wife belongs to the family, and not her deceased husband. In the process of arriving at such decision, the widow is taken into confidence and nothing is shrouded in secrecy. In fact, it is only on rare occasion that the new husband is lorded over the woman. Instead, the woman is allowed to make her choice among the interested options as she is carried along in all the processes involved. In her favour, she is also guided by the elderly members of her husband’s family.

Although the calm disposition of the husband in the face of childlessness may covertly absolve him of all wrongs, he readily comes to mind as a man who is meek and lack direction. He may have escaped the negative gibes of the core feminists owing to his non-complaining attitude. He, however, evidently ‘commodifies’ the happiness of his new wife by choosing to stay abroad to make money. He is equally guilty of the social stigma inflicted on the wife. For descending so low to have had amorous relationship with his wife’s best friend, he is heartless. In addition, her eventual happiness at the expression of pregnancy shows that men complain less about issues of the heart.

Adenike’s mother-in-law is a woman like her. Ditto her friend in London who is later revealed as having an illicit affair with her friend’s husband! This paper, therefore, posits that women should rather unite and

find a meeting point among themselves. The rallying point that women need is not in fighting and condemning men but in being their sisters' keeper such that another woman becomes their neighbor and to hurt her in any way becomes a no-go-area. By so doing, women will be fulfilling God's commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself. Therefore it may not be totally wrong to conclude that feminist should rather look inward instead of castigating men as their nemesis, imaginary enemies to be fought and hounded. Nwahunanya (2016) has admonished women to rally round themselves in their determination to alter inhuman treatment in the society, rather than engage in a futile contest with men. In this vein, Olaniyi (2016:5) warns of the danger in the wholesale implantation of western theory into the generation of meaning in African critical discourse without taken African culture into cognisance:

Besides, there is the need to receive with extreme caution the implantation of western sophistry in Africa's critical domain. In African studies, cultural meanings are ascribed to concepts within the confine of their historical, aesthetic and traditional worldview thus, the rationale behind the implantation of western feminism, postmodernism and post-structuralism in African literary discourse is suspect. Since Africa is neither an "appendage" nor a "cultural satellite" of Europe, the generation of meaning in African discourse can only be credible when the socio-cultural cosmo of Africa is taken into cognisance in arriving at such meaning.

This, in the opinion of Fashina (2008:60), is because

postcolonial theory is fraught with many assumptionist errors, one of which is to read all postcolonial discourses as if they are products of the same cultural, aesthetic and historical consequences. Another problem is the shallow application of Western induced meanings on the rather cryptic semiotic and semantic cultural meanings of African writings, arts and aesthetics, which often lead to misinterpretations of the emotions and signatures of 'Africanness' and blackness in the works.

Therefore, efforts should be geared towards articulating an indigenous feminist variant devoid of the stereotyped predilection of western feminist which neither privileges African worldview nor takes the plight of non-western women into cognisance. African feminists have distilled their critical standpoints to the advancement of indigenous feminisms which have the conditions of African women in a quintessential African context as the centre-piece of theoretical postulations. Even if strategic paradigms differ, a development which prompted Nnolim (1994) and Nwahunanya (2016) to refer to indigenous feminist postulations as "a house divided" and "violence on women, violence by women" respectively, feminist critics of Nigerian extraction have never shirked from their resolve to advance indigenous variants of feminist poetics, outside the dictate of the west, with critical works like Akachi Ezeigbo (2012), Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (2007), Helen Chukwuma (2006), Chioma Okpara (2004), Obiona Nnaemeka (2004), Mary Kolawole (1997), Chukwuenye Ogunyemi (1996), and Catherine Acholonu (1995). These research efforts have produced indigenous variants like snail-sense feminism, stiwanism, nego-feminism, womanism, motherism amongst others.

In *Mother of George*, it is ironical the protagonist, Adenike, loses her dignity in the final analysis. The revelation of the paternity of the baby brought so much havoc than blessing. The psychological fulfillment which trails the conception of George can be likened to an instance of jumping from firewood to frying pan. The alienation which Adenike suffers both physically and mentally is enough justification to conclude that in a matter of the heart, making the right choice is essential. Rather than succumbing to the alternative offered by the mother-in-law, she should have considered the option of adoption, intro-baby and at worse baby factory. The marriage which she has laboured to keep finally shipped out of her

hand. At this point, the influence wielded by the mother-in-law becomes meaningless as she couldn't save Adenike from humiliation and eventual desertion.

Considering the mother-in-law's stance in the film, it is worthy of note to state categorically that western feminism should be jettisoned for it has failed to articulate cultural meaning in African worldview. Instead, women should seek to protect themselves from hostile cultural stereotype. The pain inflicted on Adenike is from a fellow woman. Is it not a woman that has subtly oppressed another woman? The justifiability of this is not unconnected with Ayodele's refusal to heed the doctor's call. But the final decision was taken and executed by "mama" whose ploy eventually breaks the camel's back. Would "mama" as a mother have advised her own daughter the same way if Adenike were to be hers? Would she not have discouraged her even if the suggestions were to have emanated from the daughter directly? The role that "mama" plays is also condemnable when we consider the implication of Adenike's action. Mama, as a mother-in-law, is expected to be the custodian of culture. She ought to possess the knowledge of the cultural implication of their plan "but for her selfish interest and her insistence on the continuity of her lineage. She, therefore, overlooks the aftermath and pursues her selfish interest. At the end, Adenike becomes the sacrificial lamb.

In Africa culture and traditional practices, there are punishments for deviant behaviour whether or not the act is perpetrated in publicly or in secret. It is believed that the ancestors who are the representative of the Supreme Being on earth have a "third eye" and "third ear" not only to be omniscient but to see everything that transpires anywhere, anytime. The argument therefore is that despite "mama's" awareness of this, she is still not discouraged from her ominous plan. The punishment for deviant behavior ranges from humiliating sacrifices, for the purification of the concerned community. This is in line with the cultural dictates, values and norms which are held sacrosanct. A violation of any of the norms and tradition in a traditional setting is a violation of all and must be followed by an appeasement to the ancestors who may unleash wrath not only on the villain but also the entire family. If the appeasement is neglected, it is generally believed that a deviant act desecrates the land and must be sanctified for peace to continue to reign. Sometimes, the punishment is weightier. It may be in form of storming. It may also involve banishment from the land as well as total destruction of anything that the family of the offender represents. At another time, it may be in form of exile for a stipulated number of years. With all these in mind, is it not wicked of "mama" to have forced Adenike into such a heinous act. How justifiable then is it to believe that men constitute the heartaches to women? Is it out of place to conclude that even if men are the villain working against women, the unity of women would have sounded the death knell to women subjugation, at least in Africa's socio-cultural milieu?

African society is replete with paternity uncertainty all because of the issue of childlessness. If the trouble does not brew from the real father of the supposed child, any unforeseen circumstance can lead to an unhealthy rivalry which may shatter a once happy home for life. Sickness is one, spiritual instruction is another. Funny enough, paternity test is now at the reach of not only the rich but also the down-trodden. What then is the joy of a treasure that brings sadness in the end? Ayodele's brother's attitude can be viewed from this perspective. His threat, rude behavior and sudden independence are indications of his plan to assume leadership position of the family. Like the biblical Jacob and Esau, he believes that the brother's inability to father a child is related to exchanging of birthright with a plate of porridge, even if Ade is not directly involved in the plan.

Adenike's friend is another character worthy of note. Whereas she adorn the toga of a friend friend in need, her deeds both, consciously and unconsciously, reveal that of an enemy in disguise by having illicit affair with Ayodele. Her suggestion for Adenike to buy and wear revealing clothes is a pointer to the fact that she wants her to enter trouble with the husband. This, symbolically, suggests that Adenike should set herself free from the shackles of marriage which the husband represents. This is to say that if she is not able to physically convince the society of her fertility, then her hidden virtues should be exposed to the world! This is a pointer to feminist theorists to note that here, it is not a man that is working against the woman. Rather it is another woman cunningly working against the peace of another woman. The reality of this act is that Adenike's friend is also envious of her marital status and if possible may want to turn the table against her in her own favour. It may also be that she is on a revenge mission. It is bewildering

when this same friend is featured again as the fiancé to Ayodele's younger brother! Is it that whatever a younger brother 'eats' the elder brother must also 'eat' and vice versa? Is this action indicative of their sojourn in a foreign land where anything goes? It is possible for them to have forgotten that the norm of African culture is binding irrespective of the geographical location of any African.

The names of the characters are another mirror through which the paper may equally see into the inner mind of the character. Significant in the sense that they capture the history, religion, traditional belief of the families. Names like Odewale, Odetunde, Odesina, and Oderinde signify a family of hunters. In the same vein, a family which experiences innumerable death of new born baby gives the name Ikumolu. The name "Adenike" in Yoruba land is significant in that it denotes someone from a royal lineage. The variants of the names are also determined by gender- male and female. Connotatively, a woman's husband is her crown in Africa. Hence a woman with a husband is respectively treated. The reverse is the case when a woman is not married. However it is a thing for one to be married, it is another thing for one to be pampered and taken care of in such marriage. It is sad that rather than being pampered by the crown, Adenike is dehumanized both physically and psychologically.

Besides, Ayodele may be excused after all. Although he is of Yoruba extraction, the influence of his western orientation has manifested on him. He stays in the west where liberty from all inhibiting, stereotyped tradition is advanced for all. Although he prefers Yoruba ladies, he has, unarguably, been 'indoctrinated' in the western episteme. This cultural inconsistency, a clear manifestation of our unbridled neo-colonial reality, is antithetical to the articulation of African cultural norm. This dangerous commentary, which is reminiscence of Achebe's Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer At Ease*, is at variance with the sustenance of Africa's cultural mores. It should be discarded and thrown into the trash can of history where it rightly belongs.

CONCLUSION

The crux of this paper is that rather than seek to find imaginary enemy in men, women should look inward and blame themselves for the woes which bedeviled them in the patriarchal social order. Adenike's friend and mother-in-law play an active role in subjecting a fellow woman to emotional trauma all because of her childless status. Until women start to be others' keeper and ward off any influence and advances from men, on the excuse that a fellow woman would suffer untoward pain on account of such amorous relationship, until mothers-in-law realise the need to allow their sons' marriages to weather the storm and survive on their own, the end may not be in sight for women subjugation in the world.

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