THE FEMINIST THOUGHTS IN THE WORKS OF ZULU SOFOLA AND EFUA SUTHERLAND

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Abstract
Females usually, without taking notice of it, feel the discontent of the marginalization of the women folk. As a result, they feel the need for a feminist discourse. Directly or indirectly, this philosophy affec
tsome of the women, and even affects the way they appreciate life and things around them. Female writers are not left out; the need for a feminist discourse is deeply rooted in them, and this at times influences their writings. Even when the female writers have not set out to promote the importance of women in society or the fact that all human beings were created equal with equal rights, they end up, even though it may not be overt, criticizing the marginalization of women by men. This is how this discourse assesses the works of Zulu Sofola and Efua T. Sutherland who are among the most prominent female playwrights in Africa.

Keywords: Women Folk, Philosophy, feminist discourse and marginalization

Introduction
Feminism, generally speaking, is a movement against male domination or the marginalization of women by men. According to Laundry and Maclean, “Feminism refers principally to those ideas and movements, which have sought to challenge and transform the roles ascribed to women in traditional societies.
(2). Be it as it may, they:

… think that in the current historical movement where information technologies wield considerable power, the terrain of culture is as worth contesting as any other especially in its historical dimension, where so many fights break out over which version of lived cultural history is true… the legacy of the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements suggest that a certain amount of official historical forgetting is going on, as if racial and gender-based inequalities were no longer injustices in need of social action (X-XI).

Abrams commenting on “feminist criticism” has this to say:

As distinctive and concerted approach to literature, feminist criticism was not inaugurated until late in the 1960s. Behind it, however, lie two centuries of struggle for the recognition of women’s cultural roles and achievements, and for women’s social and political rights …. Much of feminist literary criticism continues in our time to be interrelated with the movement by political feminists for social, legal, and cultural freedom and equality … (93).

For most women, the gender-based inequalities were not instituted by nature; they are rather man-made. Thus, these injustices meted by men on women need some social actions, and feminism is one of such needed social actions. And the need for this fight became imperative or was heightened:

When an economic adviser to Czech government and the former soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev can both speak of a need for women to “return” to their “natural primary role” or “their purely women mission,” we are in the grip of a patriarchal gender ideology untouched by socialist revolution. The feminization of poverty and the intensified exploitation of women across the international division of labor testify to the fact that moment of feminism is far from being over (Laundry and Maclean XI).

Laundry and Maclean, therefore, categorize feminism in three perspectives: the radical feminists who are of the opinion that it is not enough to talk about equal rights between men and women. Rather, there is supposed to be “a general transformation of society …”. To them, “… all existing social and political institutions need to be uprooted and replaced.” The liberal feminists are of the view that once there are equal opportunities and legal equality between men and women, women oppression will definitely end. On the other hand, the socialist feminists believe that women oppression or patriarchy will not cease until “the economic inequalities and class oppressions of capitalist society are specifically addressed” (2).

On Zulu Sofola and Efua Sutherland’s Views
Having discussed feminism to an extent, it becomes pertinent to discuss Zulu Sofola and Efua Sutherland’s views on feminism. Generally speaking, some people, especially women, would rather refer to Zulu Sofola as a traditionalist rather than refer to her as a feminist per se. It is not as if she is against women liberation (or feminism as the case may
be) but the underlining factor in her philosophy of feminism is that she sees feminist propaganda or feminism from the Afrocentric point of view rather than from Eurocentric point of view.

Strictly speaking, feminism as we know it today is Eurocentric; it is a product of Western civilization. As Laundry and Maclean contend: “The women movement of the last twenty years constitutes a significant movement in a much longer story more than three hundred years ago, a story which, in turn, can be seen as a chapter in the even longer story that would take us back to Plato and Aristotle” (ix).

That notwithstanding, Sofola, instead of picking up “arms” to fight patriarchy or the so called marginalization by men would always rather encourage fellow women. As quoted by Akinwale, in a radio interview Sofola had with a reporter of the CBS Radio in Buffalo, she said: “I believe every woman has a right if only the women can tap them. I call on my fellow women in Africa and the black Diaspora to brace up the challenge and not stay mourning male deprivation” (15).

As far as she was concerned, all human beings--men and women alike--are created with the same biological composition, and there is no limit to progress if one has not built a wall of inhibitions around himself or herself. With this belief, she rose to become a very great artist and the matriarch of African women’s literature. In addition to being the first female professor of Theatre Arts in Africa, she was one of the first black African women creative artists to emerge in the 1960s.

She has, therefore, contrary to certain opinions, made women the heroines of her plays, thereby projecting the image of women in society. Due to her Afrocentric views on women liberation, she maintains that “the problem of black women in Africa was not the same as that of black women in America. Thus, the African woman should examine her own position and problems so as to tackle these problems and proffer solutions” (Akinwale 15).

Worthy of mention are her two plays where this view of hers stands out. These two plays are The Ivory Tower and The Sweet Trap. In The Sweet Trap, she fires at women who, due to the academic qualifications they have acquired, try to lord it over their husbands. On the other hand, too, she goes further to admonish men in the play to love and respect their wives, and not bully them. In the same vein, The Ivory Tower is a dramatization of the spirit-filled Kemitia who derives her inspiration from victorious historical queens--Moremi, Amina, Emotan, Nefertiti, etc — to fight the campus cult members (who are mostly males) and end up defeating them. In these works, she has succeeded in encouraging African women to aspire to greater heights.

The view of Zulu Sofola on feminism can be summarized in the words of Ayo Akinwale as follows:

Thus, Mama did not say that she was unaware of male domination in the various aspects or areas of endeavours in Africa. She was convinced that in traditional African societies, the women were not completely relegated. Thus, the use of Afrocentric point of view to examine this problem will bring about a better solution to the problem. Preaching women liberation through a Eurocentric point of view would not solve the problem (16).
The above explanation becomes necessary especially in our modern African society where many women are making “much ado about nothing”. As Bassnet postulates, “Feminism has … politicized the various forms of artistic and imaginative expression that are more popularly known as culture, reassessing and transforming film, literature, art, the theatre and so on” (26).

Sofola, in the real sense of the fact, was more concerned with the tradition of her people (the Aniocha people of Delta State) rather than bemoaning the marginalization of women or the domination of men in our society. That notwithstanding, the importance of women in every Igbo community, for instance, cannot be over-emphasized. Due to the fact that they are usually forbidden by their custom to be vocal, Igbo women peripherally appear to be dutiful and obedient wives. But it is important to point out that they have their own peculiar way of influencing things which often is in a quiet and gentle manner. However, at critical times, they may take drastic measures. In trying to discuss how Igbo women can make their points or bring home their points, Ulli Beier points out:

But woe to the men, when a woman feels really wronged. If an Igbo woman is wronged by her husband (in the Umuahia district for example) she will run out of the house wailing and crying, ‘I am angry, I am angry!’ This will provoke the entire women of the village to run together in the market place, all shouting excitedly and if the cause is important, the women from the neighbouring villages will be sent for. They will sit solidly in the market place, a united front against the men, and they will expect to be fed until the quarrel is settled. Such an open war between the sexes is unthinkable in a Yoruba community, where the relationship between the sexes is not dramatized to the same extent (50).

In the same vein, Efua Sutherland is a traditionalist. It can be said that there is a big divide between the traditionalists and the core feminists. Women like Mariam Ba, Buchi Emechata, Ama Ata Aidoo, Helen Chukwuma and Flora Nwapa, to mention but a few, think that this marginalization of women should be stopped. As far as they are concerned together with the other women in the same school of thought, the African tradition as well as the Western religion has been used to keep women subservient. To this end, Aidoo argues that it is necessary:

To try to remind ourselves and our brothers, lovers, husbands and colleagues that we also exist, and should not be taken as something bad. African women struggling both on behalf of the wider community are very much part of our heritage; it is not new and I really refuse to be told that I am learning feminism from abroad. Africa has produced as much more concurred tradition of strong women fighters than most other places; we are refusing to be over-looked; we are only acting today as daughters and granddaughters of women who always refused to keep quiet (35).

The above stance of Aidoo can be seen as a kind of reaction to the manner in which some male writers present despicable and immoral image of women in their works of art. A good example is Cyprian Ekwensi’s Jagua Nana (1962). In this novel, the female
Characters are presented as prostitutes who are morally decadent. Even in Achebe’s *A Man of the People* and *Things Fall Apart*, the women in the novels may be somewhat said to be relegated to the background.

On the other hand, women like Catherine Acholonu, Zaynab Alkali, Zulu Sofola and Efua Sutherland are more liberal in their feminist ideology. In fact, Catherine Acholonu wrote a book titled *Motherism: An Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995). For her, the radical feminists’ style of male character portrayal should be criticized. According to her, “Some women writers have misunderstood feminism to be synonymous with violent confrontation, militancy and aggression, and have written their works along these lines. These would include Buchi Emechata at the head of the list, Molara Ogundipe, and even some works of Ata Aidoo” (92).

She goes further to caution the women for prudence:

> Women writers must strike a balance between outright aggressive radicalism, and finding a holo-grammatic approach, a dynamically organic approach to writing that will encourage mutual understanding, co-operation and acceptance among sexes rather than emphasize areas that divide us… even further (93).

It is in the light of this that Efua Sutherland, in her plays, especially in *Foriwa*, *The Marriage of Anansewa* and *Edufa*, presents women playing important roles in society, but they operate within the dictates of the African tradition. For instance, as the custom of the land demands, in *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Anansewa obeys her father totally even when the actions of the father do not go down well with her. But being her father and the man of the house, she does everything the father expects of her without resistance or rather without much resistance. In the play, Anansewa’s father uses her daughter to his advantage, but she obeys throughout. He proposes his one and only daughter in marriage to four chiefs from different places whom he has shown the daughter’s photograph to “with advantage”, but due to the fact that this action is taken by her father, she accepts everything without much opposition.

In the same vein, Akosua and Akwasi are used in the play to highlight the importance of the head-drink ceremony; except this tradition is observed, a man cannot call a woman his wife. As a result, Akosua refuses to accept to be a wife to Akwasi just for the mere fact that the head-drink ceremony has not been performed. Sutherland, therefore, makes it clear that women are not mere objects that can be picked anywhere and taken home. Rather, before a woman is taken to a man’s house to be his wife, there must be certain necessary ceremony which must be done.

In *Edufa*, the love of a wife for her husband is shown clearly. Even though Ampoma (Edufa’s wife) does not know the implication of the oath she has been made to take by her husband, out of her love for her husband, she swears to die in his place. For the fact that Sutherland, like Sofola, is not a core feminist but a traditionalist, the female characters in her play are homely and down to earth. They respect the men folk to the extent that they can go out of their way to make themselves unhappy just to make the men around them to be happy.

**Sociological/Educational Factors Affecting the Playwrights**

Zulu Sofola was taken to America by a Catholic priest and she spent her undergraduate days as well as her Master’s degree days overseas. One would think that these long years
of sojourn would have affected her orientation regarding the way she viewed tradition. Nevertheless, she came from a royal family-- royal lineages from both parents. So, her attachment to culture was very strong; if not, she would have probably lost her cultural attachment.

In fact, she was born into three strands of traditional aristocracy. Her father, having descended from the monarchical royal family of Issele Asagba, therefore became a chief by inheritance. Also, her mother, Nwagade Okwumabua, hails from Umese, and belongs to the royal family of Issele Oligbo as her grandmother was the Eze-Omu of Issele Oiligbo. As evident in Sofola’s *King Emene*, the Eze-Omu is the leader of the women’s arm of government.

Similarly, her great granduncle founded a Kingdom next to Issele-Ukwu during the 19th century. Her connections to these different royal families, one would believe, gave her the opportunity to be able to see at close range the rituals of the traditional set up. And this definitely had significant influence on her first plays. Even though she was later taken to overseas by a Catholic white priest, she was not blinded by Eurocentric views of life.

Also, apart from her cultural affinity, she later got married to Professor Adentunde Sofola, who was a professor of Sociology at the University of Ilorin. With this development, her interest in tradition deepened.

In the same way, there is need to say that Efua Sutherland after her graduation at Homerton College, Cambridge University, London, spent another year at the School of Oriental and African studies, London. There she studied Linguistics, African languages and Drama. One would say, without mincing words that these experiences and studies really helped her to consolidate what she previously had from her cultural background.

More so, the establishment of the Ghanaian Experimental Theatre was borne out of Sutherland’s innate desire to create a theatre which was deeply rooted in the sensibility of her people. She tried to establish a theatre which could produce plays that can have an appealing effect on her people. Writing in an article, William Bascom quotes Sutherland as suggesting that:

> The African heritage claims wider frontiers for drama, gloriously demonstrating that it is a means by which people communicate the vital issues and concerns of their own lives, in their own persons, in real life situations in addition to using it in terms of theatre (where drama is a game of pretence) (64).

**Conclusion**

There is no gainsaying the fact that the problems of African women were not and will never be the same with those black women in America. Therefore, the African woman just as Akinwale had posited, should examine her own position rather than view feminism from the Eurocentric perspective. Kudos to Sofola and Sutherland who understand this viewpoint, and have refused to pick up “arms” to fight men who are said to have marginalized women. At some point, one may wonder who is being marginalized--men or women--and who among them needs to be liberated. Even though this is not within the ambit of this discourse, this is an issue that needs to be given some serious thought.

Sometimes, when this issue of marginalization and the so called liberation is critically looked into, one would find out that the women are just crying foul. This is because, come to think of it, which marginalization should be considered rather seriously:
the marginalization of men against women or the marginalization of women against fellow women.

On the other hand, just as the proverbial squirrel who eats with its tail lying on what it will eat later, the women shout for equal rights with men, and at the same time, they try to avoid as much as possible having equal “suffering” with men. As the Urban Dictionary (on line) rightly puts it:

Feminism is the belief that all people are entitled to the same civil rights and liberties and can be intellectual equals regardless of gender. However, you should still hold the door for a feminist; this is known as respect or politeness and need have nothing whatever to do with gender discrimination (emphasis ours).

It is therefore necessary to reiterate the words of Sofola, “…in traditional African societies, the woman was not completely relegated. Thus, the use of Afrocentric points of view to examine this problem will bring about a better solution to the problem. Preaching women liberation through a Eurocentric point of view would not solve the problem” (160).

References


