

The Market Metaphor and Women Empowerment in Contemporary Nigerian Drama: A Study of Three Plays

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Abstract

The importance of market in human society has been recognized not only from the practical utilitarian point of view but also from the theoretical dimensions of economics, anthropology and other social sciences. In most traditional society, the market like other institutionalized components of the community, started in a relatively simple pattern and gradually developed into a relatively complex and heterogeneous organization where women play an important part. The aim of this paper is to investigate the portraiture of women in the market place in contemporary Nigerian plays and examine the signification of this against the larger backdrop of women economic, social and political empowerment in traditional society.

Introduction:

A lot has been written by scholars on women empowerment in Africa and indeed Nigeria. There appears to be a consensus that suggests women have always been at the receiving end of socio-economic indices and play second fiddle to men in the traditional socio-economic set up. For instance P.T. Bauer argues that "trade is not regarded as occupation by most women in West Africa" (1954:11). Our aim here will be to examine the veracity of this school of thought with regard to the portrayal of women in the market place in contemporary Nigerian drama. We shall begin by delving into the origins of market.

The search for the origin of markets in traditional society has generated much critical discourse. Its origin seems to be relevant not only to speculative thinking about the past of traditional societies but also to the practical exigencies of modern economics. Of the main ideas about the rise of the market, B.W. Hodder is of the view that the orthodox idea starts with the individual's propensity to barter which brought about the ideal of the necessity for local exchange (1965:47). In developing this view, some earlier writers like Charles Goods have attempted to give a conceptual idea that each society or community was once without a market place institution until it was induced either by external forces or internal needs (1971:69).

The market as a social institution appears to have existed for a considerable period in Africa and in fact globally. One can also argue that the phenomenon of market in African society cannot be said to have been introduced by Arabs or Europeans through contact as some historians claim. No doubt, external contacts may have induces the expansion of markets in traditional Africa and indeed Nigeria however, historical and cultural evidence suggest that the idea of the market is indigenous to traditional African society. These market institutions served several functions beyond the economic one of a place where goods and services are bought and sold. Apart from buying and selling they also create the avenues for social interaction and the opportunity for meeting old friends and creating new acquaintances. For example it is in the market that women who have been separated from their kith and kin by marriage are able to meet their relatives and other kinsmen and women. Other

functions of the market include the use of market cycle as calendar, child naming and workshops for artisans. It is in this sense that D. Fords and G.I. Jones observe that the market in traditional society is made up of a cluster of villages sharing one place which is at once economic, ritual, political and cultural (1950:16). Lesser functions of the market include a place for gossips, rumour mongering, refuge for the mentally challenged and an agent of the spread of anti-social tendencies.

In contemporary Nigerian literature the market as a social and cultural institution has been highlighted by several writers in their works. We can cite examples like Chinua Achebe's in *Things Fall Apart*, Nkem Nwankwo's *Danda*, Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Emeka Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral*, Femi Osofisan's *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Ama ata Aidoo's *Anowa*, Irene Salami's *Emotan* and Utoh-Ezeajugh Nneoma among many others. These writers have appropriated the market place as the setting for some of the memorable actions in their works. One significant feature of their use of the market place has been the tendency to weave their plots around the women folks who are presented as important players in the traditional market set up. In these literary works, women are cast in the mould of market leaders and amazons of commerce. It is this creative design that has inspired the attempt here to examine the place of women in the market institution vis-a vis the ideal of socio- economic and political empowerment in traditional society. Our attempt to investigate this cultural, socio-economic and economic phenomenon will revolve around three plays; Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, Emeka Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral* and Ojo Bakare's *The Gods and Scavengers*. The plots of the first two plays are derived from history while that of Bakare is inspired by contemporary socio-economic situations in the country.

Soyinka's play is a creative retelling of an actual incident in 1944 during the reign of Alaafin of Oyo, Oba Siyanbola Oladigbolu the first. History has it that his commander of the royal stable Olokun Esin Jindu was required by tradition to join him in the form of a ritual suicide to ferry him across to the world of the ancestors. Emaka Nwabueze's own play derives its material from the Aba women's riots of 1929 that led to drastic changes in the British colonial regimen of taxation and warrant chief system.

The portrayal of females as astute market women in dramatic literature goes as far back as the 5th century Greece where Aristophanes in his play *Thesmophoriazusae* (411 B.C) had women traders who urged for the prosecution of Euripides because his plays have opened the eyes of the men folks to feminine failings so that they now keep closer watch of their wives. Cast in the mould of Akinwunmi Ishola's *Madam Tinubu*, this Aristophanes' play has females who traded on appurtenances of sacrifice to the gods. They charged Euripides with threatening their means of livelihood by casting doubt on religion. There are quite a good number of other examples of radical female traders and market women in contemporary drama that parallel Aristophanes' such as those we have cited above.

Before delving into the two play texts that are our concern here, we shall attempt a definition of the term empowerment and then correlate it to socio-economic and political influence. Empowerment is derived from the verb 'empower' which is defined as to give authority or official permission to do something. The Chambers Concise Dictionary puts it aptly, "to give someone a sense of their own importance, worth and ability to achieve things

(2009:386). Taking our cue from the above definition, the trajectory of our analysis here would be to examine the nature and depth of women involvement and active participation in socio-economic and political activities in traditional society as evident in their delineation in dramatic literature.

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* presents us with the quintessential traditional market place populated by the women folks. The very first hypothetical stage direction goes thus,

The passage through a market in its closing stages. The stalls are being emptied, mats folded. A few women (emphasis mine) pass through on their way home, loaded with baskets. On a cloth-stand, bolts of cloth are taken down; display pieces folded and piled on a tray (1975:9).

The lines above paint the scenario of a market institution dominated by women. There is no mention of the men folks by the playwright. This design however, does not imply that markets in traditional society are devoid of men. It would appear that the playwright in recreating the natural environment and persona who populate the market, used women as metaphors to comment on social duty and responsibility in a male dominated contemporary society. This is quite at variance with the views of some critics who argue that Soyinka, sublimates the female gender to the supremacy of the phallogocentric philosophy in his plays. For instance Biodun Jeyifo, while observing that there are tough, steel-nerved and also sensitive women in some of Soyinka's plays, still goes on to posit that,

No single female character in the Nigerian dramatist's plays is moulded in the image, or comes in putative line of the primal energy...a strong, self-divided promethean protagonist and the choral group of socially disadvantaged characters ringed around the protagonist- are both typically constructed around an assumed normatively of maleness. Thus, even where there are two or three strong female presence in Soyinka's play, they are usually in the margins of the drama proper which unfurls as an agon between male protagonists and antagonists (2004:97-98).

Jeyifo's assertion above could be considered as tendentious and sweeping. In the light of the relentless journey of individual and collective perdition in this play, Elesin's plight was significantly precipitated by the power of the female essence in the Beautiful young girl (17-18). In fact Iyaloja the leader of the women puts the psychic dilemma to Elesin in these words,

You have betrayed us. We fed you sweetmeats such as we hoped awaited you on the other side. But you said no, I must eat the world's left-overs. We said you were the hunter who brought the quarry down; to you belonged the vital portions of the game. No you said, I am the hunter's dog and I shall eat the entrails of the game and the faeces of the hunter. We said you were the hunter returning home in triumph, a slain buffalo pressing down on his neck; you said wait, I first must turn up this cricket hole with my toe (68).

One would ask rhetorically at this point what brought Elesin to the market. Was it just a token of artistic craftsmanship or a deliberate design by the playwright? Probably, it goes to show that markets are often situated along important crossroads that form the spine of human movement and interaction in every community. It is a location that fosters economic activities and commercial growth. Hence important activities or incidents are often linked with the market square in the traditional society. By filling his market with female characters, Soyinka evidences our thesis that women in the traditional society are not far removed from the template of socio-economic and political empowerment. Placing this side by side our explanations of the functions of market, one could argue that these women are engaged in an important task which is at once both economic and social. They are traders, purveyors of information and ideas as well as agents of social interaction. These attributes leave us with the image of a group of individuals who are economically and socially empowered in the true sense of the word. They have a sense of their own importance in the setting and exude a high degree of worth and ability to achieve their socio-economic goals. Thus the attempt by some scholars to interpret indigenous culture as one that traduces the feminine effort is quite contestable. Those who see in Iyaloja a mere token of embellishment, need to examine critically the dénouement of Soyinka's play where she is given high visibility. Iyaloja, the leader of the market, perhaps more than any other character in *Death and the King's Horseman* gives us an abiding insight into the psychic torture of the main character, the implications of Elesin's abdication of duty and the futility of the efforts of the Western powers to thwart the indigenous tradition.

Iyaloja: Oh Elesin, see what you've become. Once you had no need to open your mouth in explanation because evil-smelling goats, itchy of hand and foot had lost their senses. And it was a brave man indeed who dared lay hands on you because Iyaloja stepped from one side of the earth onto another. Now look at the spectacle of your life. I grieve for you.

Pilkings: I think you'd better leave. I doubt you have done him much good coming here. I shall make sure you are not allowed to see him again. In any case we are moving him to a different place before dawn, so don't bother to come back.

Iyaloja: We foresaw that. Hence the burden I trudged here to lay beside your gate.

Pilking: What was that you said?

Iyaloja: Didn't someone explain? Ask that one. He knows what it is. At least we hope the man we once knew as Elesin remembers the lesser oaths he need not break (70-71).

The seeming condescending disposition of Iyaloja to Elesin above speaks eloquently of a woman who knew the tradition and culture of her people. Her words evoke the image of an individual who wields much influence beyond the market environs which the playwright employed to give her content and substance at the beginning. It portrays her as representative of the conscience of the society, a metaphor for which women in most traditional African societies are associated with.

We shall pause here to examine Emeka Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral*. Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral* evokes the same images as Soyinka's play. While most of *Death and the King's Horseman* is crafted in poetic dialogue, *The Dragon's Funeral* is emblazoned with smooth prosaic language. Like *Death and the King's Horseman*,

Nwabueze's play opens with a flurry of activities in the market place. Movement one of the play presents women immersed in the dim of commerce and intra-personal communication.

Evening. The scene opens in Orié market. The women (emphasis mine) are packing their wares in readiness to close for the day. They perform some folkloristic songs as they pack their wares. The songs are designed to demonstrate their attitudes to themselves and society at large (5).

Like Elesin, Ekwedike the village griot punctures this ebullient atmosphere of trading and eulogizes the women,

My beautiful ones. The ones that gave honour to our ancestral land (laughs) They say that the snake will always give birth to something that resembles it (Pauses) My beautiful ones, seeing you here at the historical market makes me remember Adaugo Nwanyeruwa, the daughter of Ojim. Nwanyeruwa, the Valliant's jaw that grows grey beards. Nwanyeruwa, the mighty man-woman who led the Aba women in an uprising that shook the Colonial Administration (6).

Ekwedike in these words of praise draws a parallel between the women's sense of responsibility and achievement and that of their forebears who were also market women. He tries to recapture the essence of the market place which served as the platform for the women's gatherings that conceived the rebellion against oppressive colonial laws. In fact in the play there is a graphic portrayal of the link between the economic and political energy of the contemporary women and the colonial market women led by Adaugo Nwanyeruwa. The playwright brings this design vividly to the reader-audience by transporting us to the market place of the colonial era superintended by Adaugo. In the very first encounter we witness a consummate meeting of women in the market place to articulate the important social issue of colonial taxation,

Women of my ancestral land, there is dust in the air. Evil men have enveloped our land. The name of that evil, that dust is government. We have heard different rumours about what the government is doing and even what it intends to do. Our husband's have heard it, our children have heard it, even the trees of our land have heard it. The serene atmosphere of this village will soon be disrupted by the strangers in our midst who call themselves government. If we go to the market (emphasis mine) it is government, if we cough, it is government. Women of Ngwaland, shall we escape into the ant-hole because of government? (18)

Apart from exhibiting a high sense of responsibility and radicalism, the location of this women's gathering is quite instructive. The market place as we highlighted earlier provides the avenue for meeting and sharing of information that affects the community. Nwabueze in this play presents a group of women who are empowered to the extent of articulating an important issue that threatens the fabric of their society. By making the contemporary women in the first scene experience the social vision of their forebears in Adaugo and

her followers, the playwrights achieves a remarkable success of tracing the tradition of group identity and empowerment as occasioned by traditional female mercantilism and drive.

Beyond the normal image of a chorus, and characters of embellishment who indulge in excessive singing and dancing to the delight of the men folks, the women in these markets are presented as individuals involved in the serious matter of commerce, exchange of goods and ideas and information. Their dialogue suggests this much,

Adaugo: We shall not allow ourselves to be harassed unnecessarily. I have heard that in

their own country women are highly respected. But when they come here, they treat us like ash that must be dissipated for the next meal to come. Shall we allow ourselves to be treated like ash?

Women: No!

Adaugo: My sisters, we shall not allow ourselves to be taxed. We shall resist any attempt to harass us. We shall put things in order... our men look weakly and do nothing. We should not be afraid to fight. The earthworm has neither a knife nor a hoe, but it pierces the earth with its stomach. We must resist the government. And if they come after us, we must fight back. (19).

In addition to the radical rhetoric exhibited by Adaugo in the lines above we distil a character imbued with self confidence and vision which are fitting traits of an empowered individual. Despite her lack of Western education, she understands the dynamics of the skewed relationship between the ruled and the rulers, between the colonial government and the colonised peoples hence her retort, "I have heard that in their own country women are highly respected. But when they come here, they treat us like ash that must be dissipated for the next meal". Adaugo clearly gives us a glimpse into the state of the women folk in traditional society before the advent of Western influence. In these lines she seems to suggest that the African women had some modicum of social and economic empowerment which was completely eroded by Western male oriented culture.

The market women in *The Dragon's Funeral* are not mere appendages and foil for their men folks. Adaugo Nwayeruwa like Iyaloja commands critical and artistic space in the play till the very end. In fact the resolution of the conflict in both plays is predicated significantly on the knowing contribution and vision of the women folk. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Iyaloja berates Elesin for abdicating his responsibly thereby endangering cosmic harmony and wellbeing of his people. By the same token, Adaugo lampoons the colonial officials and their local collaborators like Nduka, for daring to inflict more hardship and suffering on the people. These women present the image of individuals who are empowered within the universe of their communities. They are leaders in their respective markets. And it would appear that their delineation as leaders speaks eloquently as to the level of confidence and power which they wield.

Bakare's *The Gods and the Scavengers* is a social commentary on political corruption and greed in contemporary Nigeria. The playwright draws his characters from familiar ethnic stereotypes in the country. Thus he uses names such as,

One significant feature which it shares with the first two plays that we examined is the presence of market and market women. Like Soyinka and Nwabueze's plays, the market is led by a woman. And the important decision to fight the establishment is taken in the market.

The market scene filled with women, in *The God's and the Scavengers* goes thus,

The atmosphere changes to a market situation. The four couples settle for selling and buying. More traders and buyers join them and the buying and selling continues until suddenly, a siren is heard blaring from a distance and the sound of cars screeching to a halt. One market woman (emphasis mine) peeps into the audience (8).

Just as we find in the plays of Soyinka and Nwabueze, women command much critical space in Bakare's market place. In fact like Soyinka he also has Iyaloja as the market leader. This character performs her duties as a leader with unique flourish as she enlightens the women and men in the market while at the same time admonishing the local government,

Iyaloja: All dis one-way una dey talk, una dey scratch the body of cocnut with fingernail. If dis market extend go reach Kafanchan, make roads big so tay five elephants dey waka side by side the same time, things no go better for we if big people wey dey thief things wey belong to the land no stop. If all the wayos and jibitis wey dey our blood no stop, we no go make any head way for this land. So Honourable the thing we want be say, make una stop wayo and jibiti for this land (10-11).

Iyaloja's admonitions here bears a striking resemblance with Adaugo's invective with the agents of the colonial officials in *The Dragon's Funeral*, it also shares the same texture with Iyaloja's rebuttal of Pilkings in *Death and the King's Horseman*. What this goes to show is that there appears to be a trend of meaning and signification which runs the gamut of the three plays studied here. This trend is anchored on the female characters while the signification is given vent by situating them within the market institution. Like the characters in Soyinka and Nwabueze's plays, Bakare's Iyaloja comes across as a consummate leader and motivator of women. Her boldness in confronting the Honourable member of government is instructive of her strength of character and resolve. Her personality paints the portrait of one empowered by her social state and occupation. As we stressed earlier, the market environment with all its features would have had significant influence on the personality of Iyaloja. Thus, it would not be out of place to suggest that social, economic and political vagaries associated with the market place have fortified Iyaloja materially and morally to confront the establishment. One sees evidence of this in her ability to successfully effectively lead the other women in the market such as Ijeoma and Hadiza and in fact the men who also came to the market to challenge the corrupt government agents.

Iyaloja: (Rushes after him) Oloye...Oloye. but the Honourable has said he is not taking royalty again. Which one is this? (Chief Madunagu enters)

Ijeoma: But Mazi, the Honourable has just left this place. He even refused to take common gift from the market women not to talk of royalties. I don't understand o.

Haiza: Haba Mallam! Mai ya faru? Ran ka dede just left this place. I am not sure he mentioned like that to you Mallam...

Iyaloja: (Cuts in) Stop it! Stop it! You are singing a song of hopelessness, this is no time for hopelessness, this is time for hope.

Others: Hope?

Iyaloja: Yes, that some hoodlums in the name of councillor try to perpetuate irregularities, fraud and long throat should not make us hopeless...If our spokesman and representatives are not happy with the wind of change that is blowing across the land, they can die and roast in pieces (15-16).

So far, we have tried to examine the tokens of dramaturgy with which the women who are cast in the image of leaders in the market are presented in *Death and the King's Horseman*, *The Dragon's Funeral* and *The Gods and the Scavengers*. In the subsequent paragraphs we shall try to articulate the metaphoric signification of their primal location within the market place. We shall do this with reference to the thesis of our paper on the signification of the market as metaphor of female empowerment in the traditional society. By our definition of the market and its functions, one could argue that the exigency often associated with the setting has equipped these women with the requisite skills to confront society and culture. Activities such as negotiation, inter and intra personal communication have equipped these women with the faculties to assert themselves and chart progressive courses. Being traders who engage in commerce, it is natural to assume that they command much economic space within the community hence they can champion personal and group agenda. It is equally in this regard that the market comes across to us as a fitting metaphor to investigate the ideal of empowerment. Although there other tokens of settings with which the female characters in our plays are delineated, we have chosen the market for special attention because of its varied functions and signification. Because these females are cast in the mould of leaders and successful business person we cannot but assume that they are sufficiently empowered not only to remain in business but to influence those social ethos that impact their lives as individuals and as a group. They appear to be enlightened and well versed in the variegated circumstances in which their society finds itself. From these deduction we can thus argue, that the market, given its features and functions offers us a veritable template on which to place the female characters of Soyinka, Nwabueze and Bakare's plays

on a critical monocle. The political and economic elements which the market offers, the universal and dynamic opportunity it presents as a place where important individuals in the community visits and interact, avails these women with the tools to confront their communities and impact it positively. One could thus infer that perhaps the tendency to locate very strong female characters in the market is a deliberate scheme of construction.

Beyond the normal activity of buying and selling, the market in contemporary times has often been seen as being synonymous with men. As a result of the Western capitalist orientation brought by Western colonization, men have gradually displaced women from the commanding heights of trading in traditional African society. In fact Ifi Amadiume observes that wealth for the traditional women include livestock fowls, rich yields in farm and garden

crops, lots of daughters, who bring in in-laws and presents and many wealthy and influential sons (1995:31). The views above by Amadiume, goes to show that women in most traditional African society were well off in terms of material acquisition. The nomenclature “petty trading” today is seen as the preserve of the women folks, and no longer the serious affair of commerce conducted with every manner of traditional decorum. It is important to note that the male characters in the plays examined in this paper relate with their women with a knowing mien of respect and recognition. Their views formed significant platforms in the understanding and resolution of the conflict in the plays. Unlike their men folks, they emerged the opposing forces and emerged as heroes and conscience of the society.

Commenting on the fact that Soyinka “wears many hats”, James Gibbs observes that his hope as an interpreter of the Nigerian dramatist’s works is to highlight that even within the diversity and versatility of his creation as a writer and his involvements as an activist, “the reader will feel the current of a life which is not pursuing different courses separated by islands and ideas and delta flats, but a strong river full of eddies and subtle flows, but one stream, one river, one flow” (1981:3). We can apply this creative image of Soyinka to his metaphoric use of the market and the women in *Death and the King’s Horseman*. One may need to go beyond the facial reading of the play, as well as situate it within the purview of tradition to fully appreciate the significance of the female characters and the market as a social institution. It is also in this sense that the semantic anomaly with which we associate a metaphoric design can be fully grasped. By the same token, I have pointed out elsewhere that Emeka Nwabueze could be considered as a reflective thinker as his self awareness and consciousness has led him into the process of thinking about art and society in a constructive manner. This scholarly preoccupation probably has led him towards unmasking pretensions, becoming aware of his culture and history thus accelerating the process of self and collective consciousness (2011:12). This awareness finds rich and vivid reality in the market women led by Adaugo. It is a consciousness which empowers these women politically to confront the forces of oppression and triumph at the end. Gayle Austin writes that,

There is now a growing body of feminist literary criticism of plays. Some of this is first stage “image of women” criticism, which points out patterns in writing by men in which, for example, the female characters suffer or die in order for the male characters to grow or continue on their life journeys. Other, second-stage criticism focuses on patterns in women’s writing such as repressed fears and anger expressed through coded plot lines and character types. Third-stage theory-centered work tends to focus on language itself and the connections or lack thereof between words and reality (1990:21).

We can appropriate Austin’s classification above and situate our critical effort between the first and second schools of criticism. The market women in the plays analysed in this paper are modelled on the habitués of women staking their lives for their men folks and indeed the entire community. By the same token, these heroic attribute is given vent in the coded language of the women which allowed us examine the metaphoric nature of their

market setting and the symbolism it provides in understanding the ideals of gender empowerment in traditional society.

In conclusion, we advance the view that what the portrayal of women in the plays we examined in this paper suggests is that women exhibit a significant level of empowerment in most traditional societies in Nigeria. Using the market as a critical kaleidoscope we have tried to highlight the various tokens of activities which one can associate with an empowered group to stress and elucidate our point. Thus we can conclude that the three plays of Soyinka, Nwabueze and Bakare examined here, are fitting representatives of the significance of the market as an institution in the traditional society and the place of women in it.

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