

African Performance Review

Vol.1 No.1 2007

pp51-61

Feminism and Representations of Gender in Zulu Sofola's *King Emene*

Kenechukwu Igweonu

Department of Drama, Royal Holloway, University of London, United Kingdom.

Abstract

This paper examines gender roles in Zulu Sofola's *King Emene* and how these constitute an Afro-centric representation of feminist aesthetics in contemporary African theatre and performance. The paper argues that the play can be seen as having some degree of feminist potential through Zulu Sofola's logic of placing women at the heart of the narrative. It also highlights the playwright's vision for an African feminist aesthetics which draws from traditional African philosophy that places premium on the role of women in the society, and which in turn produces a healthy perspective on issues of gender and sexuality. Drawing on *King Emene*, one of Zulu Sofola's seminal plays, this paper argues that traditional African theatre and performance offer ample recognition to women, evidenced in the importance and relevance attached to feminine roles within that tradition. Conversely it is with the advent of the literary theatre tradition, derived from Euro-American theatrical traditions that African women began to lose prominence in the domain of performance. This paper therefore contends that it is this incongruity in contemporary African theatre and performance that Zulu Sofola tries to address in most of her plays.

The climb has been rough and craggy, but victory is for him who endures to the end. Some colleagues and friends who watched the climb often referred to me as a man in a woman's body. But I say I am a woman in a woman's body because it takes the tough reed a woman is to weather life's battle in all its ramifications. (Sofola, 1994: 25)

Feminism questions the rationale for a patriarchal world view, as well as the preponderance of masculine modes of production, both in performance and the society at large. Feminism creates in the artist, a crucial impetus which can be geared towards the development of an

aesthetic that questions male domination and gender inequalities, ultimately advancing critical dimensions for feminist expressions. Even though I cannot claim to speak for women or African women in particular, my interest in this subject was stoked by a deep-seated admiration of Zulu Sofola's creative genius. Through her life and works Sofola articulates a vision of African womanhood that can be seen, in my opinion, to constitute an African feminist ideology. Although the essential nature of this subject makes it too extensive to be covered in this paper, my intention is to briefly examine issues surrounding gender roles in Zulu Sofola's *King Emene* by exploring her depiction of the socio-cultural identity of the African woman in the play. I will argue that the play can be seen as having some degree of feminist potential through Sofola's logic of placing women at the centre of her narratives, by which means she is able to articulate and (re)present the importance of women in indigenous traditions of Africa, most of which have been eroded through transculturation. The key lies in Sofola's vision of an African feminist aesthetics that draws from traditional African philosophy in which premium is placed on the role of women in the society, and which should, in turn, produce a healthy perspective on issues of gender and sexuality in contemporary African theatre and performance.

While I cannot deny writing from an awareness of the overwhelming patriarchy of our contemporary society, it is important to note that indigenous African societies offer ample recognition to women. This is evidenced in the importance and relevance attached to feminine roles within that tradition. This is the gist of Chinweizu's thesis titled "Gender and Monotheism: The Assault by Monotheism on African Gender Diarchy," in which the concepts of gender dualism and gender diarchy are explored:

Gender dualism, with its attendant gender diarchy, means that in a well-ordered society of the African type, powers and responsibilities are shared between genders, and acknowledged as shared, both in the home and the polity. (1997: 18)

Chinweizu maintains that different activities are shared out to men and women within most African societies and that each gender derives appropriate authority from the functions they perform in such a way that there is reciprocity of roles. In essence, gender dualism eventually leads to gender diarchy, which is the division of authority between men and women. Conversely, the advent of the literary theatre tradition, derived mainly from Euro-American theatrical traditions, has meant that African women no longer have prominence in the domain of performance. This thesis can be teased out from "Song, Story and Nation: Women as Singers and Actresses in Zimbabwe" in which Moreblessing Chitauro *et al.* (1994) identify extant conflicts between performance and domestic spaces in the lives of women performers. It is this incongruity in contemporary African

theatre and performance that Zulu Sofola tries to address in most of her plays, especially in *King Emene* where she draws directly from the tradition of the Delta Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria to present female characters that are secure in their femininity.

Also drawing on *The Artist and the Tragedy of a Nation* (1994), one of Sofola's seminal theses in which she outlines her philosophical musing on the roles and functions of the theatre and its performers in the fast evolving African societies, this paper concludes that Sofola's vision for contemporary African theatre and performance is a pragmatic one. The paper present as evidence, Sofola's engagement with traditional African philosophy and performance aesthetics derived from her study of theatre and life in her traditional Enuani community.

About the Play

King Emene is tragedy that centres on the life of a community at the crossroads in the transition into a new year. The play is set in the village of Oligbo during the Peace Week which is a time of the year when the king carries the problems of the community to the gods in exchange for peace and prosperity in the New Year. Emene, one of the central characters in the play, has just been crowned king of Oligbo and rightly desires to usher in the Peace Week as kings before him had done, but in his stubbornness he refuses to heed the warning of the oracle. The gods through Omu, who is its assigned medium, demand that the king should not go ahead with the peace week without first atoning for the crime committed in the palace by Nneobi, the king's mother. The crime is the murder by Nneobi of the rightful heir to the throne of Oligbo in order to guarantee Emene's unchallenged ascension to the throne being the next in line. King Emene is, of course, unaware of his mother's crime. However, in his desire to outdo those he suspects of plotting to kill him, just as they supposedly killed his father, the former king, he takes as his enemy anyone that tries to draw his attention to the crime that had been committed in his palace and the need for an investigation and public confession.

The king is consequently surrounded by sycophants like Jigide who encourage him at every turn, telling him, "you must use an iron hand with these people" (*King Emene*: 28). Emene's mind is so made up that his enemies were out to get him that he banishes the Omu and appoints Nwani in her place to consult the oracle. Despite this Nwani returns from consulting the gods with the same message as the Omu, except that, this time, her choice of words convinces the king to take the warning about the unclean state of his palace quite literally. Consequently, Emene develops a new obsession, telling the servant to "remove the palm wine and keep things clean and in order" (16). His misinterpretation of the message from the oracle is apparent when he confronts his mother about her conduct in the palace:

KING: Who wouldn't be angry? Nwani has brought the news from the Oracle stating that things must be clean and in order. This is the eve of the peace week and you have allowed this holy place to be kept unswept and, above all, you have created disorder by assuming responsibilities outside your domain (23).

The king is unable to confront his mother with the right questions because of his faulty reasoning; instead, he only upbraids her for her role in preventing the servants from sweeping the palace courtyard. At the end, everything falls to pieces for both the king and his mother as Nneobi's secrets are unravelled by the gods and this leads to King Emene's undoing.

Zulu Sofola: Her-story and the Role of Artists in the Society

Born in Nigeria on 22 June, 1935 during the colonial era, Zulu Sofola went to America where she attended Virginia Union University, Richmond and the Catholic University of America, Washington DC, obtaining a BA degree in English in 1959 and an MA in playwriting and production in 1966. She later returned to Nigeria and the University of Ibadan as a lecturer in 1968, obtaining a doctoral degree from that institution in 1977. In 1983 Zulu Sofola moved to the University of Ilorin where she was instrumental in the establishment of a performing arts department. Sofola blazed the way for women artists and academics in Africa in many different ways, and, as noted earlier, she was the first published Nigerian female dramatist. Some of her popular plays include *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972), *The Sweet Trap* (1977), *King Emene* (1974), *The Wizard of Law* (1975), and *Old Wines Are Tasty* (1981). She was also one of the early heads of the performing arts department which she helped to establish at the University of Ilorin.

Visionary and pragmatic – these are two words that best express Sofola's dedication to African theatre practice and her ostensible belief in the theatre as a medium for stabilising, remedying and transforming the society. Sofola is indeed a colossus of African theatre and performance, rightly deserving more critical attention than has been accorded her. This position is made more tenable by the fact that she was the first published female dramatist in Nigeria and the first female professor of theatre on the African continent. These and many other firsts make better meaning when placed in the context of the socio-political and academic environment within which she attained them, especially in a society or field that is male-dominated. Writing on Sofola's many achievements, Akinwale remarks, "she demonstrated that African women are actually capable and can serve in any capacity which men seemed [*sic*] to have grabbed for themselves" (1999: 69). Sofola's achievements justify Chinweizu's assessment of gender roles in indigenous African societies where "the dividers between these

male and female spheres are not impenetrable. Indeed, any woman, if keen enough, could enter and shine in any field..." (Chinweizu, 1997: 14).

In a seminal thesis on the role of the artist in society, Sofola draws on what she describes as the "holistic harmony" of the African world-view as opposed to "exclusionistic individualism" (1994: 3) of Western societies in her description of the African artist. She depicts the African artist as someone who draws from the divine essence to effect change in the society. The implication is that African arts is not only reactive, but is for the most part proactive, often moving those that expose themselves to its influence to thoughts and actions that would result in the breakdown of biases and inequalities. Interestingly, Sofola goes on to propose three incentives for artistic creation in Africa:

1. To heal and restore the life of a sick and battered humanity; 2. To create a new vision for growth, renewal, regeneration and edification of man for a wholesome life and better community; 3. To mobilise a collective conscience for a particular desired objective. (1994: 5)

Sofola sees the visionary artist both as the conscience of the society and a symbol of hope, who must point the way for the society. This thesis is, however, not unique to Sofola and has been expressed by others. For instance, Olu Obafemi, who alludes to the,

herculean business of the artist, who is the arrow-head of sensitivity, compassion and the collective memory; to elucidate and paint the canvas of social pain as well as etch a visionary path towards communal healing and rebirth (2006: 55).

Sofola's Place in the Feminist Discourse.

Lizbeth Goodman (1993) discusses the need to differentiate between an exploration of women's collective experience in works by women playwrights and the adoption of a political dimension to the articulation of this experience in works by feminist writers. That this view is shared by feminists in general is summed up by Robyn Warhol and Diane Herndl who state that "although feminisms are multiple, feminists do share certain beliefs,...feminists are always engaged in an explicitly political enterprise, always working to change existing power structures both inside and outside academia" (1997: x). While there are controversies surrounding the notions of whether or not works by women playwrights are intrinsically feminist, it is important to note that most women writers writing about their experiences not only promote women's virtues, but most often demand to be treated equally and fairly in a manner that points to the politicisation of their individual or collective stance as women in a male-dominated society.

Surprisingly, Sofola's plays do not isolate the problem of male domination which is a central theme of most feminist writings. Instead, she discusses it within the ambit of societal injustices and inequalities.

Zulu Sofola is not a feminist writer if by that expression is meant a conscious attempt to subvert male hegemony and invert gender relations. Her criticism of female oppression is inscribed within the general context of social injustice. (Adekoya, 1996: 98)

Of particular interest to the subject of feminism is Sofola's recognition of a political dimension in the ability of the artist to "mobilise" or incite the society into some form of action towards a realisation of "desired objectives." However, the term "desired objective" signifies the subjectivity of this mobilisation; in other words, the artist's interpretation of, say, the topic of feminism is heavily reliant on beliefs and world-views that are intrinsic to individuals or cultural entities. This accounts for the difference in the approaches to feminism, aptly encapsulated in Jill Dolan's summation of the idea of "feminisms" (1988:3) as a product of the multi-dimensional methodology employed in dealing with this subject. I find this idea of multiple feminisms particularly useful as it lends credence to the voices of those liberal feminists who champion women rights without necessarily demanding a reversal of gender roles. Sofola belongs to this orthodox group, who apart from cutting powerful images in male dominated spheres, are unequivocal in articulating the challenges faced by women in these societies and the need for a more active socio-political involvement by the women. Sofola achieves this in her plays by creating women with very strong personalities and drive, who challenge a complacent and often negative stereotypical depiction of women.

That Sofola's ideology is not radical or materialist, but essentialist is seen in her interpretation of the Christian faith and the Enuani culture in her works. Consequently, most radical feminists would view her liberalism alarmingly because of the dominant images of women who are "submitted" to the authority of their husbands. For instance, *The Sweet Trap* which is concerned with the issue of gender equality and sexual politics in marriage is centered on Clara, the female protagonist in the play. Clara, despite a protracted defiance of her husband's instruction that she should not celebrate her birthday, eventually kneels to apologise for her disobedience. By projecting the image of a subservient wife after articulating her concerns about the unreasonableness of the husband, Sofola makes it clear that confrontation is not necessarily the best way to resolve gender inequality. Instead, she proposes an adoption of a compromise position whereby the man retains his position as head of the home in which the woman's contribution is respected, thus ensuring stability on the home front. According to Adekoya (1996: 99):

Zulu Sofola's sexual politics is circumscribed by Apostle Paul's injunction that wives submit themselves to their husbands. Informed by Christian precepts and tenets, her creative works would collectively be read by a radical feminist critic as a reproduction of male psychology through female complicity....Sofola could be conveniently classified as a liberal feminist. Her goal as a writer is justice for all - male or female - a guarantee of equality of opportunity.

It is possible for most feminists to interrogate Sofola's works and conclude that they are phallogentric. Be that as it may, it is important to stress that Sofola's "identity positioning," to borrow the words of Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl in their introduction to *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, is not necessarily a universal paradigm for African women who are diverse in their cultural and ideological persuasions. Perhaps, then, one can argue that Sofola writes to Christian women who follow the teaching of the bible on "submission" to their husbands, and also to those African women, who like herself, see the wisdom in maintaining Africa's indigenous systems of gender duality and gender diarchy as identified by Chinweizu.

Essential to the debate on feminism is the realisation that individual and group perception of feminism varies, as a matter of fact, from one individual and/or culture to the other. This would require that any consideration of the subject must take into account differences, both cultural and generational, that exist between women, whether African or not, and their perception of themselves within their respective societies. Perhaps, it is the inherent difficulty in proposing a uniform approach to feminism that informs Goodman's opinion that "there is no single way of framing, or 'performing' black feminist theatre. The term itself may be meaningless, or so diverse and flexible as to have no meaning at all" (1993: 180). Following up on Goodman's observation while at the same time drawing relevance from Jill Dolan's position that "feminism has in fact given way more precisely to *feminisms*, each of which implies distinct ideological interpretations and political strategies" (1988: 3), Lynette Goddard (2003) posits that "the various feminist factions are united by their awareness of women's oppression and quest to draw attention to patriarchal constructs," concluding that African, or "black feminist projects can be seen as one among a diverse range of feminisms with a further recognition that diversity exists within black women's viewpoints" (135 – 136).

The African artists have remained on the defensive on issues of gender inequalities evidenced in the continued depictions of women under oppressive social conditions and the amoral portrayal of feminine sexuality, which draws from Western contemporary media to depict the female body as an object for masculine sexual gratification. The preponderance of such images notwithstanding, Sofola believes that the

African critic cannot address the problems of gender inequality by adopting the antagonistic feminist dispositions of some of her Western counterparts. As an alternative, she identifies the need for a systematic engagement with indigenous gender traditions in the light of present socio-political realities on the ground. Akinwale describes Sofola's response to feminism and the issue of women liberation as "Afrocentric and not Eurocentric", observing that in plays such as *The Sweet Trap* and *King Emene*, "she portrayed her heroines as firm, resolute and resourceful women" (1999: 69). And Adekoya notes for instance that "her feminism is neither the aggressive bra-burning type nor the defeatist and the [plangorous]. Paradoxical in vision and ironic in tone, it favours the sublime meridian" (1996: 106). Sofola's commitment to feminism which is identified in Akinwale and Adekoya's assessment of her works is based on her belief that women are not relegated to the background in traditional African societies.

King Emene lends itself to such plays in which the female stance is not only explored but also politicised. For instance, Omu, one of the central figures in *King Emene*, is described as the leader of the women's section of government in Oligbo and the enormity of her duty is such that she was required to consult the oracle on behalf of the entire community. The political eminence in the play of characters such as Omu, Odogwu Omu, and Nneobi, and the authority they command act together to project a feminist aesthetics that provides useful ways of viewing women that will, in turn, influence the way that African women are positioned in socio-political discourse. Even though *King Emene* is basically the story of an unwise king, the play, to a large extent, draws on its dominant feminine characters to make a very powerful statement. It is not coincidental that the play opens with Nneobi pouring the morning libation to the goddess of the people, and being confronted at the task by the Queen who was performing the same function at that time. Sofola uses this opening to set the mood of the play and to make a very powerful statement about the eminence of women in indigenous African society. In most African communities, libation is made by either the eldest male or by titled women due to the importance attached to the act as a means of securing the good will of the gods and ancestors.

That the playwright chooses women to perform this vital function is indicative of her intention to thrust them in the centre of the unfolding political drama and to give them voices that would echo throughout the play. Characters such as Omu, the leader of the women's section of the government, and Odogwu Omu, her assistant, both reinforce Sofola's vision of robust female characters. By virtue of her position, Omu's political sphere of influence extends all the way to her role as the mouthpiece of the goddess of the community, Mkpitime. The authority of her position is such that the king would not be able to usher in the peace week if she does not give her consent. As a result, her plain-spoken

conveyance of Mkpitime's message of impending danger did not go down well with King Emene who declares her an enemy and appoints another woman, Nwani, in her place. By this time, however, Omu's opposition to the ceremony is already known to the entire community and eventually lead to protests against the king's insistence that the ceremony go ahead.

The prominence of women in the indigenous African socio-political construct, especially in areas where cross-gender collaboration is necessary in ensuring social harmony and progress, clearly shows that there is a peculiar feminist aesthetic which African artists need to grasp. Embracing an aesthetic that is rooted in African culture is at the heart of Chinweizu's concepts of gender dualism and gender diarchy identified, and informs Lawrence's remarks that "the fact that husbands and children always have been of utmost importance to African women and their Caribbean counterparts has never meant that black women have been passive or powerless" (1983: 4). Lawrence's perception of the importance of family to African women does not suggest in anyway that husbands and children are not important to women elsewhere in the world. What it does, however, is that it amplifies and lends credence to Chinweizu's reading of gender dualism and gender diarchy as stabilising influences in indigenous African societies.

Sofola derives her inspiration for placing women at the centre of narrative from the traditional African setting, in which women have been known to acts as priestesses to the gods of the land and as such participated in shaping their communities. On the other hand, the advent of the literary theatre tradition, derived from Euro-American theatrical traditions, is a major factor in the loss of prominence in the theatre witnessed by African women. This is what Chinweizu refers to as "the assault on gender diarchy" (1997: 24). Sofola also express this idea in *The Artist and the Tragedy of a Nation* where she argues that the muse, which is the creative essence in the artist, is in the West,

metaphorically encapsulated and appropriated by the male creative artists into himself (women were not supposed to be creative artists nor inventors in European cosmology nor were they supposed to be thinkers), among the Enuani people, *Onunu-Nka* is a Hermaphrodite and thus does not restrict itself to a particular gender. (1994: 6)

The figurative neutrality in the gender of the creative essence means that it can be readily appropriated by both the male and female artists among the Enuani people. Sofola therefore paints the scenario in traditional African setting where artistic creativity is a shared venture between the sexes, pointing out the obvious source of the contradictions in contemporary African theatre creativity as that which has been imported from the West. It is the genderless nature of the muse that lends authority to the female artist through which her voice can be heard and respected

within the patriarchal Enuani society. The female artist thus empowered is no longer seen as being subordinate to the male artist, but stands on an equal pedestal to comment on the society. Sofola submits that "the degree of closeness of the artist in his creative essence to the Supreme Creative Centre determines the level of his artistic sensitivity, the quality of his talent and the texture of his humanity" (1994: 5 – 6).

Through her plays, therefore, Sofola prescribes an approach to feminism that is not necessarily confrontational or which does not require the reversal of gender relations. In other words, Sofola does not ascribe to the sort of feminism that does not recognise the importance of gender dualism and gender diarchy to the African society. On the contrary, she advocates an approach that recognises and contends with feminist concerns and disaffections along with other socio-political prejudices in the society. This is because it is the same socio-political system that construes different cultures and peoples as the subordinate "other," that constructs patriarchy in ways that might be offensive and oppressive to the African women.

References.

Adekoya, Olusegun (1996), "Sofola's Place in the West African Women Writers Canon" in *Glendora Review: African Quarterly on the Arts*, Vol. 1, No. 398

Adeyemi, Lere (1998), "The Yoruba Cultural Values and the Ideology of Feminism" in *Alore*, Vol. 9, No. 1.

Akinwale, Ayo (1999), "Zulu Sofola: Echoes from a Nigerian Female Theatre Artist" in *The Performer*, Vol. 1, No. 1.

_____, (1989), "Zulu Sofola: Her Writings and Their Undermeanings" in *Nigerian Female Writers*. Otokunefor and Nwodo (eds.), Lagos: Malthouse Publishers.

Chinweizu (1997), "Gender and Monotheism: The Assault by Monotheism on African Gender Diarchy" in *The Essentials of African Studies*, Vol. 1. Sophie B. Oluwole (ed.), Lagos: University of Lagos.

Chitauro, Moreblessing, *et al* (1994), "Song, Story and Nation: Women as Singers and Actresses in Zimbabwe" in *Theatre and Performance in Africa*. Eckhard Breitinger (ed.), Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies,

Dolan, Jill (1988), *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

_____, (1992), "Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles?" in *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*. Laurence Senelick (ed.). London: University Press of New England

Goddard, Lynette P (2003), *Staging Black Feminism(s): Representations of Race, Gender and Sexuality in Plays by Black British Women Playwrights, 1979-1999*. PhD Dissertation. Royal Holloway, University of London,

Goodman, Lizbeth (1993), *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*. London Routledge,

Lawrence, Leota S (1983), "Women in Caribbean Literature: The African Presence" in *Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture*, Vol. 44, No. 1

Miller, Jeanne-Marie A (1982), "Black Women Playwrights from Grimké to Shange: Selected Synopses of their Works" in *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (eds.), New York: The Feminist Press,

Obafemi, Olu (2006), "A Tribute to Femi Osofisan – The Alchemist of Cognition, at Sixty." *Portraits of an Eagle: A Festicraft in Honour of Femi Osofisan*. Sola Adeyemi (ed.). Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies Series.

Sofola, Zulu (1974), *King Emene: Tragedy of a Rebellion*. Ibadan: Heinemann.

_____. (1994), *The Artist and the Tragedy of a Nation*. Ibadan: Caltop.

_____. (2001), "The Theatre in the Search of African Authenticity." in *The Performer*, Vol. 3.

Warhol, Robyn R and Diane Price Herndl (eds.) (1997), *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.