

Women and Politics in *In the Chest of a Woman*

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Abstract:

*This article examines the condition of women and politics in the play *In the Chest of a Woman*. Efo Kodjo Mawugbe portrays his female characters—Owusu, Nana Yaa Ekyaa, Abrewanana, and the loyal slave—as an oppressed social group. These female characters fight to take part in the governance of the kingdom of Ebusa. Among them, the portrayal of Owusu appears to be the most complex due to the confusion surrounding her identity. Indeed, it is Owusu's mother who concealed her true identity in order to challenge the kingdom of Ebusa. She does this because she lost her inheritance and the right to ascend the throne after her mother, the Queen Mother. When the transfer of power to women failed, they were excluded from the decision-making circle. They struggle against socio-political injustice and are ready to sacrifice themselves for their fellow women who have no direct access to the authorities. This study recommends avoiding the marginalization of women in decision-making and encouraging the inclusion of all social groups in order to promote the transfer of power to women in society.*

Key Words: Eligibility, Injustice, Leadership, Politics, Rights.

Résumé :

*Cet article examine la condition de la femme et de la politique dans la pièce de théâtre *In the Chest of a Woman*. Efo Kodjo Mawugbe décrit ses personnages féminins Owusu, Nana Yaa Ekyaa, Abrewanana et la bonne esclave comme un groupe social opprimé. Ces personnages féminins se battent pour participer à la gestion des affaires du royaume d'Ebusa. Parmi ces personnages, le portrait de Owusu semble être le plus compliqué en raison de la confusion de son identité. En effet, c'est la mère d'Owusu qui a caché sa vraie identité pour défier le royaume de Ebusa. Elle fait ceci parce qu'elle a perdu son héritage d'accéder au trône après sa maman, la reine mère. Quand le transfert de pouvoir aux femmes a échoué, elles sont exclues du cercle de prise de décision. Elles luttent contre l'injustice socio-politique*

et sont prêtes à se sacrifier pour leurs compagnones qui n'ont pas de contact direct avec les autorités. Cette étude recommande d'éviter la marginalisation des femmes dans la prise des décisions et l'implication de toutes les couches sociales afin de promouvoir le transfert du pouvoir aux femmes dans la société.

Mots Clés: Droits, Éligibilité, Injustice, Leadership, Politique.

Introduction

Women issues are discussed in all fields of human endeavor. There in are evoked questions around equality, rights, socio-cultural changes, financial and economic development, and politics. The fact that many scholars show interest in the issue about women implies how much the study of women issues is considered to be among dominant themes of the post-independence African literature.

The image of African women in literature is related to changes taking place in traditional African societies. This change also concerns Ghanaian society. Efo Kodjo Mawugbe presents in his play women as he sees them in contemporary Ghana. Among the female characters there are the conservatives and those who are radicals and who call for change in a patriarchal society.

The work uses Reader -Response as its theoretical framework. This approach helps the reader to interpret a literary text according to his experiences. The aim of the application of the Reader-Response Theory is to elicit learners' personal response to literary texts, as well their reactions when dealing with literary texts (Elena Spirovskab, 2019, p.24).

Notwithstanding, the methodology used in this study is the qualitative one and it is used in two ways of having data. The first is the primary source which is *In the Chest of a Woman*. And the second one is the critical documents like books, journals, unpublished works, internet, and thesis. This work is limited to women's involvement in politics as mentioned in this

book. The work is restricted to women's political ambition and the Question of their Eligibility for Leadership.

1. Women's Political Ambition

According to Oxford English Dictionary (2nd edition, 1989), ambition is "the ardent desire to rise high position, or to attain rank, influence [over a situation or the existing system]".

Obviously, political ambition is to engage oneself in the battle of leadership or for a political position. It is also to affirm one's identity. This is the motive of women's movement *In The Chest of a Woman*. Their struggle catches the attention of their adversaries: some men, religious beliefs and customs. Besides, women's ambition is the claim of certain opportunities, privileges that are regarded as men's prerogatives. The degree of ambition goes to the extent of compromising the traditional norms. In this sense women challenge what is done right from the immemorial time that places man, in almost all the domains, over women.

Hence, in this play, *In The Chest of a Woman*, we notice such a manifestation of political interest in female: Nana Yaa Kyeretwie, Owusu and the prince Ekyaa. This political interest motivates Ghanaian women to go against men's chauvinism. They think men are trying to maintain the rude tradition with its unchanged rules of conduct in order to suppress their rights. From then Ghanaian and African in general show their interest to the need of getting power of getting power and it's us Nana Yaa says in the following passage:

Ye spirit above, may you let me see the
successful end of the wheel of change I've set in
motion. A wheel of change that shall leave all
men convinced that, In the Chest of a women is

not an extension of the breast and a feeble heart
but a flaming desire to possess and use power!
(35-36).

Nana's ambition is, in her words, change and reform. She challenges all the men of Ebusa kingdom, those who possess power, the rules Her fight comes after the story about herself as victim of men's (or elders') injustice who influence her mother; the queen mother to refuse her to come to the throne. By the time, she receives the king's message, she has already convinced Owusu who accepts his mother's enterprise as she says "a wheel of change is now on and which doesn't leave any man indifferent" (36). For Nana, being a woman by nature does not take away her passion or her faculty of thought rather it animates her with courage and determination to get power and exercise it.

Thus, if she expresses her feeling about getting power, it is because Mawugbe wants to tell the readers that this woman (Nana Yaa) has made up her mind to reach her objectives. For example, at the beginning of the play, the playwright creates a game to introduce the story. This game displays the image of Yaa Kyeretwie's preparation of her political terrain. The author through Nana Yaa sensitizes African women in general and Ghanaian women in particular to be determined in their fight. For him, African women should imitate Nana Yaa in their movement. They should first have to educate their fellow women constantly. It is to keep the fight to their own advantage. To have Owusu close to her shows the need for women to develop inter-personal relationship while preparing the entrance into political arena.

In her plan, the author talks about first round that corresponds to the psychological preparation of Owusu to be the king. Nana Yaa: "Yes everything is now set for the next round of the game. I am going to teach men that there are women and there are still women". (32)

Through this game, Nana hides her ambition. To be sure, she reminds her 'son' that he will succeed his uncle king Kwaku Dua II and she warns Owusu not to dare to sit on the stool judgment if he is asked unless he is enstooled.

My son ..., listen carefully to what I am going to tell you over there in your uncle's palace at Nkwanta is a judgment stool on which Daasebre sits to adjudicate serious matters affecting the Ebusa kingdom. Don't ever sit on that stool, unless you've been enstooled and sworn as king. (34)

Nana's warnings to Owusu are not evident if he will be ready to usurp his cousin stool. Her ambition is to use Owusu as subversion to her tradition and to show the limit of her people's thought. We notice that the heir apparent (owusu) is also interested in political malignance. 'He' remember that his true identity is female (identity). This pushes him to defend women's fate. As a young girl, Owusu has his word to say in the political arena.

Although he is warned by his mother, Owusu changes his mind, He wants to see what will happen if he sits on the stool judgment. Again, if he is discovered that 'he' is not a man, he will be executed according to their rules. His insistence to sit on the stool shows his political ambition. He knows the risks that he undergoes but he prefers to be sacrificed.

Even though, the princess has touched his breast and probably she knows who he is, Owusu will not come back because he thinks at all events he will be discovered because Ekyaa knows "he is not real man". Either to act according to the will of his mother to usurp power or sit on the stool judgment to

judge the king's daughter, Owusu thinks the princess will tell the audience that he is not a man. And the penalty is death. He tells his mother that obeying her is like usurping power: "I cannot usurp her right to it" (27) and Nana remind him that! "Nobody has an absolute right to anything in this world" (27). Owusu states, "it is a dangerous game you want me to play mother". He complains but he cannot give up fighting for freedom even if it will cost him.

The heir apparent keeps his engagement till the abandon of their execution. We can say sacrificing his life means to eradicate bad practices of his custom.

After that he makes a long speech in which to declare Ekyaa's death penalty. When Owusu is asked to sit on the stool judgment, (There is a quick exchange of glances between Kyeretwie and Owusu) (80).

Unfortunately, he says "all the same, I shall proceed to the solemn duty that devolved upon me..." (80). He continues saying that "all right, I shall do as the custom says" (81). We are not sure if Owusu is being obedient to his custom or in contrast is he trying to draw the attention of the audience by saying "all the same I shall proceed, all right I shall do as the custom says". So everything that will come out through this speech he does not care. He states:

The narrow mental footpath of our customs be widened. To accommodate the free spirit of reforms, forgiveness and reconciliation. I'll be told in no uncertain that long before my grandfather's great grandfather's mother was born the customs were there. (82)

The critique made towards his customs is that it allows the execution of a girl, pregnant out of marriage. According to

Owusu, it is nothing but a narrow mental footpath of his society that needs to be widened. Mawugbe wants to say it's time to reform the traditional political leadership that will henceforth treat men and women equally in terms of opportunity. The out mode practice should be stopped. This view is explicit reflected in Owusu's word to princess Ekyaa:

Be bold and tell us who did the foul deed. I decree that he who did sow the unnatural seed in you should not live to see the dawn of day after his apprehension... [and] the genitals with which he showed the unwanted seed... shal be presented to the chiefs, elders and the people of Ebusa at the durbar such as this. If he is uncircumcised, both the mother and father shall be killed. (82)

Knowing that he is a girl, Owusu seems angry with the situation of his cousin, the princess. He wants her to be courageous and to tell him how it happens to her. Then, as the judge he reminds to the audience what will happen to the man who does the unwanted deed to his cousin. The first thing to be done to the culprit is to cut off his genitals and this according to the rules set by men. Of course pregnancy out of wedlock is punished but the punishment of an execution is exaggerated. Akyaa wishes to sacrifice herself for the cause of women. Not that she wants to be executed and have Owusu as King. Unfortunately, she is obliged to name the man responsible. When she points out Owusu, the judge, as the man responsible, her wish to see "she" becomes a King is aborted.

Like Nana Yaa and Owusu, princess Ekyaa is also ambitious. Though she is of royal blood she provokes the royalty that wants to use her as a trap to have Owusu in order to maintain the fortune of Ebusa. That is to say the fortune of the nation is to

be under the control of a royal family. Ekyaa contradicts her father. She lets herself to be pregnant out of marriage though she knows the cost of her deed. Her behavior shows that she is a rebel who is ready to do everything that comes in her mind. The following statement depicts that attitude to her father. “(Boiling with rage) she states “If you were not my father I would have spat into your face or hurled this stool at you (73)”. She asks her father “will you take your hands off me? I am going to tell you nothing. You can do your worst. (74)” Princess refuse to tell father because she knows that a meeting will be convened again during which she will humiliate her father and the elders. In our understanding this reveals her political ambition. Therefore, she plans humiliating all men in the palace in favor of women.

In sum, the women have in common the determinism to break men’s power and to uphold theirs. As Nana says: “... such power, seek to break not only the bonds of customs, taboos and antiquated traditions to which women are chained, but also deals a heavy blow to that-old myth of male chauvinism. (32)” So these are their objectives to eradicate the myth that has created the superiority of men over women.

Mawugbe tries to highlight the new political culture in Ghana that increases women’s political ambition. For the playwright women’s family duties and femininity should not reduce the chance of competing for leadership position in their community. He does not caution the disparity between men and women. Both men and women should have equal access to political leadership.

2. The Question of Women’s Eligibility for Leadership

Whether in traditional or contemporary societies, leadership is determined by some rules and principles defined by the given societies. The rules set the criteria to compete to elective posts.

One is allowed to compete if he/she is eligible. The English Dictionary defines eligibility as “having the right to do or obtain something through satisfaction of the appropriate condition”. (en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition...) Eligibility is the principle that an individual can be elected or run for an elective position to become a leader of a group, community, society or country... To be in position, an individual should fulfill the conditioned set by the society or nation.

In The Chest of a woman, the traditional conditions are not respected and this creates confusion and leads to indecision. Agyeman Ossei Afidwase, the editor of the play, says:

In The Chest of a Woman, reveals several instances of indecisiveness. The queen mother on her death bed is faced with the dilemma of letting her daughter, who exhibited unusual bravery succeed her against the dictation of tradition and custom. And even when she chooses to go along with convention, for once, in her own words, she set aside the usual practice to allow any of the two children who first begot a male child to take up the inheritance, which is the main plot of the play (vii, viii).

According to him, indecisiveness is in the heart of the play. We can say that indecisiveness creates obstacles to the eligibility. The obstacle here is the queen mother herself. She is indecisive to respect the traditional leadership convention but she asks her two children the one who begets a male child, that child will be the right heir to the throne.

Having said ‘begot a male child’ seems projecting into the future, the future leadership of Ghanaian society. As the queen mother lets the powerful men (the elders) to triumph by

proposing Dasebre Kwaku Dua, Nana's brother, as king after her death. These conditions are clear that women, mothers of men are out of the circle of the decision makers. The principle that permits eligibility in Ghanaian society is that to be a man or born of a male sex. By doing so, women are angry with sex discrimination and they become more inquisitive. They engage a battle in order to nullify the injustice made to them concerning eligibility. This is reflected in Nana Yaa Serwaa's words:

(Taking it cool) I see ... I'll tell you thing. The customs and political history of this kingdom are silent over what offices a women can hold, or the role played by women in the struggle to free ourselves from the domination of the Akwamu, especially the courage and bravery displayed by our mother in our last war against the slave raiders from the north. It only proves one thing... that the customs and history of this kingdom were written by men. (20-21).

Women due to their arduous involvement should have an equal treatment in politics through the word of Nana. For she reminds her mother and the elders that being physically strong does not grant a man the right to be eligible. For that matter she attacks the men of her mother's entourage and to what Ofori answers to save the honor of men vis-à-vis the provocation of little girl:

Ofori: I... I didn't think.

Nana Yaa: You didn't think... I am not surprised in the last. I have always known that you men don't think you are deceived and trapped. (22).

Ofori: (Obviously shaken) I ... I never thought...

Nana: yes, I know you men never think, so stop repeat it to my ear... (23).

For Nana it is not a surprise if men say that they do not think; it is possible because taking into account the rights of every individual needs deep thought. It is only by thinking, dialoging and discussing that solution will come out. She says men are deceived and trapped by their non-vigilance since they underestimate women's ability and commitment. Therefore, the audacity of the three women, Nana yaa Serwaa, Owusu and Ekyaa has marked a turn point on how tradition and custom of Ebusa Kingdom are viewed henceforth. The indecision is expressed in the King's speech:

Lying breathless in the women's quarters is the lifeless remains of a one-time living symbol of the kingdom's courage. Oh Kyeretwie! My loving sister Yaa Serwaa... Daminifa Due!... And there like two cows being led gently to the abattoir, a niece and a daughter. They go with the executioner most willingly. One harbours in her womb a grandchild condemned before its birth. And with her death two people when I am invited to land of the ancestors (101).

Through the above quotation, King Daasebre Kwaku Dua II laments the fate of women whom he thinks they are innocent victims of injustice. For him taking life of people is not an act. All dear ones are going to be executed. The niece and the daughter do not seem to ask him for favor. For the King, the future is unclear; "With Owusu I see a vacant stool." Indeed, if the tradition fails, it is because the time is not for some outdated social norms.

Therefore, Mawugbe shows that women are citizens like men. They should contribute to nation building. Women should also resist to oppression and intimidation in socio-political sphere, and the author simply criticizes the politics of exclusion.

Conclusion

Though Mawugbe presents the lot of African woman in the traditional and modern contexts; yet he shows that they are ready to emancipate themselves even if it means to sacrifice themselves. The playwright exposes the motives behind Ghanaian women's determination to attack the root causes of their marginalization. Mawugube believes that African society in general as well as the Ghanaian one deprives women of the same privileges enjoyed by men in politics. The deprivation of their rights is due to many contradictions inherent in the traditional society. These contradictions are manifest in power management and its transfer from men to women. The transfer of power is simply the respect of traditional convention but which in the play is not handled the way it should be.

Besides, the image given to female characters by the playwright reflects the social injustice in terms of gender equality in Akan society. He wants African societies to acknowledge women's efforts. Women's fight suggests that both men and women should mutually accept one another. This mutual acceptance is not only social or economic but also political. In this case the establishment of a good link can help the competent, whether man or woman, to be eligible at any political position.

Therefore, considering the different systems of governance, the societies experienced for the betterment of their peoples, much remains to be done in order to attain equality necessary for women to compete with men in the political arena. Real political reforms are done but need to be continued or undertaken so as to allow the accession of women to elective posts.

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