

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



### PERPETRATING THE PATRIARCHAL CANON IN CHRIS NWAMUO'S *THREE PLAYS*

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#### Introduction

Traditional literary studies identify the canon as great literatures, which embody universal experiences. As Robyn Warhol explains, the canon are "those literary works recognized as 'great' or at least as worthy to be read and studied in an academic setting" (73). What constitutes greatness in a work of art and who determines it? Literary institutions control the means of literary production and set the standards as well as decide the criteria for placing the stamp of authenticity on certain works to the exclusion of others.

Incidentally, the critical standards, which these institutions design to promote universal aesthetics, have often ignored women. By treating the woman as another "woman's difference necessarily disrupts and disturbs the orderliness imposed by male dominated systems" (Warhol, 3). It is understandable therefore when Moira Monteith remarks that "One of the immense positive gains accruing from feminist criticism is the realization that the female in literature is a literary construct" (1). This paper examines the concept of canonicity in African literature and identifies Chris Nwamuo as an emerging playwright who treads the path of his predecessors in promoting otherness.

#### Canonicity and Otherness in African Literature

The task of defining African Literature and identifying literary works, which form the corpus of "great" writings on Africa whether poetry, novel and drama was the prerogative of male critics who benefited from the differential treatment meted to the sexes by colonial education. These critics and writers such as Chinweizu, D. S. Izevbaye, Ernsset Emenyonu, John Povey, Theo Vincent, Obi Wali, Joseph Okpaku, Bernth Linfors, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, to mention a few, were all men. Their views on the canon in African



Literature were articulated at conferences and transformed into books and journals that pointed out what should be read.

Consequently, the canon in African Literature has a genderised and sexualized history because it tends to exclude the differences in women who, according to Grace Okereke, "have become late comers on the political, economic and literary spheres" (157-8). This tendency to exclude women's experience from the canon accounted for why the first critical attention on Flora Nwapa, the pioneer woman writer in Nigeria came in 1976 with Emenyonu's article "Who Does Flora Nwapa Write For?". In that article, Emenyonu undertakes to defend Nwapa's *Efuru* and *Idu* for the alleged absence of "beautiful narrative" and "powerful characterization" in these works (13).

This pioneer attempt to bring the women into the centre of discourse through the richness and density of expression unparalleled in African Literature places these works outside the canon. Robyn Wiegman and Elena Glasbery offer a useful comment on this situation when they divulge that "Great Literature may be great ... not because of the intrinsic or essential qualities, but because of the view of persuasive literary critics" (10). Canonicity has thrived on men's monopoly of creativity with the attendant fixation of women, which goes with the presentation of "biology as destiny". The result is that sex difference is utilized to exploit the genders, particularly women.

The insistence on separate spheres for the sexes because the human body functions differently justifies the confinement of women to domestic space and men to the public space. But in order to maintain the former in their position, it was assumed that women lack the abstract thinking skills for public life (Hess et al, 21). This accounts for why they are cast in relation to men (as wives, mothers, prostitutes or courtesans); a fact, which Sigmund Freud confirms:

Law and custom may have much to give women that has been withheld from them, but the position of women will surely be what it is; in youth an adored darling and in mature years, a loved wife (Jones 168).

In this scenario, the women become an appendage to men and a source of erotic pleasure. The canon in African Literature is replete with this image of womanhood from Wole Soyinka's "Daughters of

Eve" or his mythical heroines (a trait which he shares with Femi Osofisan) to J. P. Clark and Ola Rotimis' traditional women to Ngugi wa Thiongo's revolutionary heroines, the female in African literature is burdened as "need meeter" to man.

### Perpetrating the Canon in Nwamuo's *Three Plays*

Chris Nwamuo, a theatre practitioner and scholar has chosen to locate his creative sensibility within the tradition established by his predecessors in *Three Plays*. He explores the realities of life in a developing country like Nigeria by focusing on the way society dehumanizes its inhabitants. But since every artist writes from an idea-system, Nwamuo's creative spirit reflects the masculinised aesthetics, which is often associated with the male critical theory.

Each of the plays (*The Wisdom of the King*, *Save Our Lives* and *The Last Song*) treats the sexes as oppositional constructs. Man is undoubtedly the subject while woman is the 'Other'. The suggestion, according to Helen Haste is that man is assigned "those characteristics, which serve rationality, truth seeking, logic. Woman and the feminine are cast in this scenario as the antithesis, the negation (4-5). This is why the women in *The Wisdom of the King* are presented as weak while the men are strong. The King and his Counsellors are the voice of reason while Elsie his wife is the voice of intuition, a situation, which places her outside the political sphere.

The exclusion of women from politics is blamed on the assumption that she can neither perceive reality nor impose meaning on the chaos that threatens her world because of the King's decision to destroy the natural environment. The fact that nature is equated with womanhood yet the woman is denied access to it shows her powerlessness over her existence. This is shown in the veneration of Elsie as mother in *The Wisdom of the King* and the vilification of Nma and Chioma in *The Last Song*. The male ambivalence represented here as Mariama Ba reveals, attracts "Nostalgic praise to the African Mother who in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa" who is suppressed and exploited by tradition (Schipper 47).

This male politics has reduced the African mother to a one legged animal jumping in the blood spilled by men's violence/dictatorship. Yet rationality is equated with masculinity even where men are buffoons such as Akoma in *Save our Lives* and Chuka in *The Last Song*. Men's presumed rationality contrasts sharply



with women's otherness in these plays especially since Nwamuo's women in *Three Plays* suffer from varying degrees of unconsciousness because they define themselves by standards set by men. This, however, provides the rationale for the playwright to circumscribe his female characters by confining them to the body as bedmates and playthings to men. The lives of these fractured women/girls validate what appears like Nwamuo's thesis which is presented by 1st Chief: "We-wetin again. I if no be go good bed. M - man and woman?" (33). This suggests that women are useful only as sources of erotic pleasure in men's lives.

It is against this background that Nwamuo explores stereotypic images of African women in *Save Our Lives*, which looks at the scourge of Guinea to unravel the calamity that surrounds a people whose possibilities are limited by ignorance. Interestingly, women bear the brunt of it both as care-givers and patient sufferers for men. This is the dilemma of Akoma's wives whom the playwright presents as happy women in polygamy when in actual fact of marriage is a battle ground; a conflict situation designed by men for women to enact roles associated with chaos.

This tendency to equate women with chaos and men with rationality are two outstanding metaphors that sustain sex difference in all cultures. Again, Haste gives an insightful analysis of this situation when she posits that:

The route to rational justice takes for granted a rational world, a single, valid and commonly shared definition of rationality from which women have been-irrationally-excluded. (4)

This cult of irrationality, which men construct for women is typified by Nma who abandons Nwadi, the product of a failed relationship she had with Chuka in *The Last Song*.

In what is unmistakably the best play in this collection, the playwright raises a lament over the malaise of child abuse, but positions the harmer on Nma while Chuka's abdication of his responsibility is given a footnote. But Nma's problem is partly due to her lack of economic power, which the independent woman needs to confront in the experience of life. Pearce and McAdoo give a revealing dimension to this issue when they opine that:

...women, especially minority women may be

poor for some of the same reasons as men, but few men become poor because of female causes .... The same divorces that frees a man from the financial burdens of a family may result in poverty for his ex-wife and children (17).

Nma represents the majority of that adult female population in Africa who lives in poverty because of sexism and sex role socialization. In another dimension, Nma's reaction to life is motivated by Chuka's arousal of her basic need for affection. According to Denga's work on motivation:

Needs are drivers which demand satisfaction. When needs are not satisfied, a person becomes restless, tense and may exhibit abnormal behaviour. He may remain in a state of disequilibrium until the needs are met wholly or at least partially (22)

Denga's position validates Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which proposes that nothing seems to matter to human beings if the physiological needs of food, clothing and shelter are not met. Therefore, there is a clear link between poverty and human needs (Emenyi 2001). Thus, Nma's blurred vision is the result of the interplay between poverty and the activation of her emotional needs.

However, this does not suggest that African feminism is immoral. It is not and should not be. But the context of women's experience, particularly those set by masculine power cannot be completely ignored in the interpretation of such an experience. African women are self reliant and resourceful; they descend from "some of the bravest and most independent and innovative women this world has ever known", as Ama Ata Aidoo shows in her essay, *The African Woman Today* (39). It is for this reason that canonicity in African literature must include the female sensibility by accepting its significance of *difference* without configuring it as *otherness*.

### Conclusion.

The consideration of woman as an *other* is a product of the monologic male voice, which is too used to power to acknowledge the wave of change that is shaking the boundaries of tradition. This wind



is necessitated by the failure of the masculinised aesthetics that upheld a univocal approach to human epistemology or patriarchal monologism. It is from this narrow perspective that Chris Nwamuo chooses to investigate the realities of life in a developing nation such as Nigeria. His vision is limited first by a social sensibility that is not sufficiently cultivated to make adequate distinction between the profane and the profound; and second, his ideas of sex difference overlooks the dialectic of gender and its dialogic reverberations.

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