



Womanism and After: A Theatrical Justification for African Women's Radical Response to Subjugation in Reloaded

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ABSTRACT

The inculcation and transmission of socio-cultural, ideological and moral expectations of every society are as much the role of individuals and institutions of that society as the available oral or written records of the society. With the advent of modernity, the mass media have come to play crucial roles in the socialization and conditioning of members of the society to accepted or expected roles and behaviour. The theatre has come to be very relevant in this regard. Diverse thematic preoccupations have actually authenticated the social relevance of theatre and the home video, especially in the Nigerian Nollywood industry. The focus on inter-personal relationship is particularly remarkable. Some Nollywood movies are particularly exemplary in their deconstruction of the man/woman relationship in the African society. This paper studied 'Reloaded', a Nigerian Nollywood movie. The choice of the movie, Reloaded for this paper is informed by its radical departure from the African feminist tradition of womanism which tends to reject a radical response by women to their subjugation, and rather favours a sort of mild – even passive - dialogic synergy with men. This advocacy for complementarity, as we can see in a movie like Reloaded, has not brought the much-desired solution to women subjugation. This revelation is much more in consonance with reality; the reality that response to issues is spontaneous and universally natural to individuals rather than being unifocal. Using the sociological approach and adopting a critical analysis method, this study finds out that reality in the Nigerian society has shown that, in many cases, passivity, docility and persuasion have failed to bring about desired results where corrective retaliation has done the magic. The man/woman relationship is not an exception, as it is revealed in Reloaded.

Keywords: Nigerian society, nollywood movie, womanism, women subjugation.

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1.0 Introduction

The title, *Reloaded*, of the movie produced by Emen Isong and Desmond Eliot, and directed by Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen and Ikechukwu Onyeka is explained by Tracy as being a clipping of Games Men Play Reloaded (GRPR). The word 'reloaded' as used in relation to a game (an electronic game), is an indication of a restart, reversal, deconstruction, re-evaluation or modification of an existing order. It is a metaphoric inference of the need to deconstruct not only the persistent patriarchal ideals in the African society, but also the styles of African women's response to it. Of course, circumstances of life and experiences are the major sources of screenplays. And the conflict that arises from inter-personal relationship has usually been the subject matter of movies. Hyginus Ekwuazi (2002:39), in *A new approach to the screenplay*, observes that "a dramatist strives to maintain, suspend, heighten and resolve a state of tension." This is what the directors of *Reloaded* do with the man/woman tension in the Nigerian society.

The Nigerian movie industry has continued to help in reflecting the ways of life of Nigerians. This, according to Barclays Ayakoroma (2008:82), in "Nigerian video films and the image question", is an indication that "Nigerian video films are deep-rooted socially." Clement Akangbe is more explicit in his description of the social relevance of the Nigerian video films. In "Mythology in the Yoruba drama: a study of Lere Paimo films" (2008:207), posits that the Nigerian video film is "recreation of society, and a megaphone for projecting the failings, triumphs, sentiments, aspirations, history, changes, interests, idiosyncrasies, beliefs e.t.c of the society." The wide range of subjects which Nigerian video films, in their social commitment deal with include politics, history, communality, family relationship and love affairs, to mention a few. (YemiOgunbiyi1981:25). Chris Dunton (2002:100), in "Contemporary Nigerian Theater", states that, in Stella Oyedepo's plays, for instance, there is a depiction of "a dysfunctional family driven to ruin – despite the wife and mother's efforts to hold it together." This, according to him is usually due to the husband's callous disregard for the honor, dignity, and needs of the family.

Reloaded is a movie which does not only chronicle man's infidelity and irresponsibility to their families, but also reveals various ways in which women respond to it. It is interesting to note that the documentary style is employed in the presentation of the experiences of the women in the play. In this way, the women are allowed to tell their own stories. "if you don't blow your trumpet, who will?", Chelsea, who acts as narrator queries at the beginning of the play. So, as the women are set to blow their own trumpets, Chelsea invites the audience to take a ride with her to "only God knows where." This is in indication that the unexpected is likely to occur in the play; the unexpected, especially in African women's response to subjugation, against the background of womanist expectations. "But someone has still to tell this story", says Chelsea. And the women have chosen to tell their own stories. Later in the play, Chelsea tells the audience, "I have stories from women that have had different experiences that have to be told." So, as the experiences of the women unfold, the audience encounters grim realities of the dehumanizing experiences of the African woman, even in an age of modernity and civilization, and invariably comes to terms with the imperative for more radical responses from women beyond mere the ideological dialogism which womanism emphasizes.

2.0 African women: Scapegoats of man/woman relationship

Chelsea, the narrator/character introduces the audience to the chronicle of the experiences of the women in the play by stating that she has "heard things from and thinks it's only too proper to share their experiences." She then goes on immediately to make a hint at the behavior of men as central to the conflicts in the play as she reveals that "some women call them wolves in sheep's clothing." Thus from the outset, even before we have got to meet the men in their relationship with the women, we are already aware of their characters of hypocrisy, infidelity and irresponsibility. We are therefore not too surprised when we are introduced to the first couple: Bube and Yinmi who have been living together for seven years (as bed mates) and have still not defined their relationship.

Yinmi's experience is both pathetic and funny. She has lived with Bube for seven years, relying only on his promises. She lives with Bube as a wife without being one. She is not even sure of where their relationship is heading to. She realizes the uncertainty in her relationship when she gets pregnant and her fiancé does not want a child and asks her to go for abortion. It is indeed shocking to learn that Yinmi had been made to go for such abortion five times before. After much pleading, cajoling and flattery, Yinmi agrees to go for another abortion, on the rationalization of Bube that they cannot have a child until they are properly married, especially when they have not got enough to cater for children. We later get to know Bube better, as he reveals his ideology of what he thinks a wife means in a man's life. To him, as he explains to his friends, the full meaning of WIFE is W for washing, I for ironing, F for fucking and E for et cetera.

Invariably, Bube bears no real love for Yinmi. Maybe he only has a strong infatuation for her. She is therefore nothing to him beyond a sex mate (bed mate). If Yinmi is understandably shocked to discover Bube's planned wedding with another woman, the audience is not too surprised as the true nature of Bube has been sufficiently revealed, and Yinmi's folly followed with keen interest. So, the audience has expected what happens to Yinmi, having come to know the deceitful nature of the man in Bube. What is however surprising is that Bube has actually impregnated the new girl and for that reason, and "in order not to jeopardize the long-lasting relationship that both families have had", according to Bube's mother. "All the lies, all the promises, all the hopes I had", Yinmi laments, have come to nothing. She recalls her seven years of undefined relationship and her six abortions, committed at the insistence of Bube. Yinmi does not know what has hit her or where she has gone wrong.

Omore's experience with Femi is one of disappointment, betrayal and infidelity. They are actually married, but, as Chelsea reveals in her introduction of the couple, "Femi no fit see fine girl comot face." Femi is indeed very promiscuous. He goes after everything in skirt. In her attempts to ensure that her husband is faithful to her, Omore gets into brawls with various ladies who flock around her husband. Femi practically turns Omore to a mad woman. Having turned Omore to an erratic woman, Femi complains about her too-frequent quarrels. "You could win an award for being the best nag in town", he once tells her. Omore becomes fed up with her predicament. She tells her friends that when she got married, she has thought that marriage was like heaven. "Before I knew it, he brought his girlfriends into our bedroom. He has total disregard for our marriage and my person", she laments. This is the conflict which Omore manages in her marriage. And it is not a palatable experience for her.

Tayo is another woman whose marital experience is no less traumatic than that of Yinmi and Omore. Her own husband, Osita is not as promiscuous as Femi, but he does not accord Tayo any dignity or humanity beyond a serving wife. There is no mutual relationship between the couple. Rather, their relationship is that of lord and servant. Osita takes much pleasure in beating Tayo at the slightest imagined provocation. He does not stop at that, he even calls her "a very cheap whore", when she goes beyond her domestic boundary and dresses elegantly for an outing to him, Tayo has no business going on outings. She is supposed to remain at home to cook his food, wash his cloths, take care of the home, and perform all other duties for the purpose of which she is married. Chelsea, the narrator, refers to Tayo's situation as emotional and psychological torture. "Osita abuses Tayo emotionally, physically and psychologically", she affirms. In fact, Tayo sees her marriage as a disaster. She has no dignity, and she has no freedom. She cannot do anything on her own. "If I try it, he will just kill me", she complains to her friends. Osita never fails to remind her of her status in his home. He takes decisions on everything and she has no say. "I married you, girl, and I say I don't want foofoo", he once shouts at her, and when she attempts to emphasize her mutual role as a wife and partner, he quickly reminds her that, she is bought with his own money. "Did I get you for free? He queried.. "I paid your goddamn bride price", he tells her. Tayo is so devastated by her marital experience that she later laments, "I took a lot. I took too much. I lost my self-esteem. I was deeply hurt." In her marriage, Tayo is better described as a servant or a punching bag.

Chelsea, the narrator, seems to have a perfect relationship. She feels comfortable narrating the bitter experiences of the other women as there is no indication of any imperfection in her marriage.

Everything seems to be going on smoothly. Ironically, she later realizes that her own case is even the most bizarre of all the marital woes. In fact, she becomes dumbfounded when she suddenly discovers that her husband who, to all appearances loves her so dearly and whom she trusts so entirely is a homosexual. He has actually brought a man into their bedroom. She finds it so difficult to get over the shock. She has come to realize that she is one of the victims of the female experiences she has been attempting to chronicle.

3.0 Begging for dignity: African women's womanist response to subjugation

A public presentation is organized to run commentaries on the experiences of women in patriarchal African society and women's responses to their conditions of subjugation. Tracy, who plays the role of the anchor person and commentator, speaks to the audience as her presentation is being recorded with video cameras for transmission to the audience. This commentary helps the audience to be aware of various methods of women's responses to their conditions under patriarchy. Tracy begins by defining cheating as unfaithfulness and having sexual relationship with anyone other than ones partner. Having spoken to several men and women on the streets, the commentator observes that there are "different ways of dealing with issues and, of course, cheating." She agrees that, when one is cheated, one has to deal with the situation in one's own way. This presupposes individual responses to subjugation, rather than a univocal method such as the womanist ideology seems to advocate. The commentator, Tracy, for instance, says that she employs the biblical virtuous woman style as a response to her marital problems. She is however quick to add; "I am not saying because it worked for me, it would work for you."

Many African women believe in the womanist 'virtuous woman' as the best way they can solve their marital problems. It is their belief that the woman must remain tolerant, docile, submissive and supportive to their husbands in spite of whatever level of oppression or subjugation they are subjected to. They believe that, in this way, they can correct their husbands' attitudes towards them, and thus sustain the sacred institution of the family. They see their docility and silence as virtues which enhance their status as African women and 'good' wives. So, they do not see anything wrong in women, like Ramatoulaye, in Mariama Ba's *So long a letter* (1981:31), to "bend their heads and accept a destiny that oppresses them." Such African women do not believe in separatist reactions to patriarchal subjugation of their personality and dignity in their marriages. They subscribe to Modupe Kolawole's observation, in *Womanism and African consciousness* (1997:36), that "the average African woman is not a hater of men; nor does she seek to build a wall around her gender across which she throws ideological missiles." In view of this, very many African women have to practically beg their husbands to accord them some measure of respect, recognition and dignity. Otherwise, they accept their conditions as a natural given and unavoidable.

Yinmi is expected to act as a house maid to serve Bube and his friends with drinks while they watch football in the parlour. Yinmi, at least, expects him to say "please, may we have some more drinks", instead of making it sound like an order which she must obey whether she likes it or not. Bube is furious that his friends have left in annoyance because of the scene she purportedly created. Yinmi feels disappointed in her fiancé's treatment of her as a person who deserves no respect or dignity. "All I asked for is a bit of respect", she complains and practically begs. On another occasion, Yinmi comes home to meet Bube with a lady. What pains her most is not that Bube lies that the lady is his niece but that he does not accord her the right to ask questions. "I come in here and I see a strange woman, and you don't expect me to ask questions?", she asks in shock. But when Bube begins to create a scene out of her harmless question, she has to kneel down and beg him for forgiveness. Even when it is finally confirmed that Bube is going to marry another lady, she tells Bube's mother, "Angry, why should I be angry? Life is full of choices. You win some and you lose some", betraying an uncommon equanimity in her response to a shocking injustice.

The other women in the film also exhibit some measure of mild responses to their experiences. Omore sometimes has to attempt to soften the heart of Femi by shedding tears, especially when he is not

ready to see reason with her and stop his promiscuous acts. Tayo finds herself with a remorseless husband who not only disregards her position as a companion, in spite of all her sacrifices to make a good home and take care of her husband, Osita. "All I have ever done is tried to be a good wife", she affirms. And what does she get for all her sacrifices? She gets beatings and tongue-lashings for her marital sacrifices, so conscientiously made. When Osita rejects the food she has painstakingly prepared for him, she has no alternative than to 'beg' him for "just a little appreciation", which she does not get. For Chelsea, there is no chance of her not being so submissive to a man who appears to be so cooperative that he even cooks for her some times when she is indisposed.

Perhaps it is not improper to be submissive to someone who oppresses you, if in that way you can win his fidelity, respect and love. This is what womanizers intend to achieve with submissiveness and docility. Perhaps also, some women do actually attain their goals of mutual family complementarities and companionship through this womanist approach. But, reality in the African society, as revealed in *Reloaded* shows that docility and submissiveness does not always solve the problem of women subjugation.

4.0 Beyond pressure point: Women's radical reactions to subjugation

There is no gain-saying the fact that, the mild womanist approached has failed in many cases to solve the problem of women subjugation in the African society. The experiences of the various women in *Reloaded* are additional eye-opener to this. In every human society, the reality is that when one method fails in solving a problem, rationality would demand that the sufferer attempts other methods. This is a universal phenomenon, to which the man/woman relationship and the resultant subjugation of women is not an exception. In other instances, rational human beings are known to approach the solution to a problem through an eclectic approach which engenders a trial-and-error technique. This has proved a better method of solving problems in many cases.

It is certainly not true that all African women, at all times, have been able to solve their marital problems through docility, submissiveness and dialogism. Rather, when the woman is pushed to the wall, when her patience is stretched beyond pressure point, she possesses the 'human' trait and capability to fight back by allowing the thunder in her to explode. This is what *Reloaded* gives proper expression to. The thunder suppressed in the equanimity of the women in *Reloaded* eventually bursts forth as she can no longer endure the dehumanizing conditions they are subjected to by their men. Chelsea has sounded a note of warning earlier when she says "silence, they say, is deadly." She has thus made a preview of what is to come.

Yinmi's case is particularly remarkable. A careful observation of her countenance when she has a chat with Bube's mother shows that there is more to her seeming acceptance of Bube's decision to marry another lady. There is evidently an ironical tone in her statement, "angry. Why should I be angry? Life is full of choices." This is later to become manifest in her radical action. Kolawole, M (1997:205) observes that,

African women cannot remain the same within traditions that undermine them. But they need to maintain alterity to resist myths, theories and any reality that erodes their humanity, encourages self-deprecation and undermines their ability to be their own voices and act for themselves as agents of culture and of change

This is what the women in *Reloaded* have come to realize as their submissiveness fails to solve their problems. Having realized this, they started to take their destinies into their own hands and act ways that can be described as radical. In Tsitsi Dangarembga's *She no longer weeps* (2009:120), Martha acts in a similar radical manner. Having deserted Freddy, she affirms, "we are not afraid to let it be known that we are flesh and blood too ... We are not above them, so we must fight." Yinmi has some radical traits earlier when she retorts to Bube's antics; "I am tired of you taking me for granted. I do the same thing every day, every month, every year. I cook for you, clean, run errands, fuck you, and at the same time,

you don't want to make me your wife." So, when Bube abandons her, the thunder in Yinmi breaks loose. She kidnaps Bube on his wedding day, disrupts the wedding ceremony and tortures him. Yinmi becomes practically crazy in the way she manhandles Bube. This is because of her reminiscence of what Bube has made her pass through. "I was pregnant too. Six goddamn times, you made me kill my children", she reminds him. In fact she has no regret in treating Bube the way she treated him, as she reveals during the closing interview, "the good thing is that, I taught him the lesson of his life." She will not even think of accepting him back if he comes to apologize because "he doesn't deserve it", she concludes.

Omore's final reaction is no less radical than that of Yinmi. She has been known to attack her husband's girlfriends. She even abducts one of them and beats her up. She has been known to stand up to Femi, and once reminds him, "when you had nothing, I stood by you." When she realizes that Femi is incorrigible, Even though she is pregnant for her husband, she sells their house and lives him with nothing. She justifies her action during the final interview by saying that, she has only paid him back in his own coin. "It is do me, I do you", she concludes.

While reflecting on the feminist inclination of Flora Nwapa, Ify Achufusi (1994:102) posits that 'African societies have reached a point in their history when the most basic tenets and concepts governing the functions and the actual essence of man/woman relationships should be re-oexamined, so that the position of the woman within the realm of things can be re-evaluated. 'When Tayo can no longer contain the maltreatment meted to her by her husband, she connives with her niece to blackmail him. Consequently, Osita loses his job. When Osita discovers what his wife has done, he gets furious and slaps her. Tayo does not only slap her husband in retaliation, but also, with the help of her niece, she gives him the beating of his life, though, the African tradition would ordinarily condemn a wife beating her husband as having violated a taboo as such act is regarded as abominable. But there seems to be nothing abominable about a husband beating his wife on daily basis, and at the slightest assumed provocation. Of course, Tayo's beating of Osita is corrective beating, and no one can condemn correction. A similar case is that of Martha in Dangarembga's *She no longer weeps*. Martha manhandles Freddy, and ironically comments, "this is a domestic affair." When a man beats up his wife, it is regarded as a domestic affair. But if a woman dares to raise her hand against her husband, it is regarded as an abomination. This situation calls for a radical deconstruction.

For Chelsea, she has no option than to divorce her husband. What rationale could possibly make a woman stick to a homosexual? What kind of family relationship would the woman be protecting when her husband loves males rather than his wife. Of course, extreme situations call for extreme reactions. So, to Chelsea," Edwin is gone with the wind", and she decides to pick the pieces of her life and live it in her own way. Nothing can be more justified.

5.0 Conclusion

The concluding part of the play is the interview scene where Tracy the anchor person interviews the various women, and they give their reasons for acting the way they do. The conclusion that Tracy draws is that, with various researches, it has been established that, in Africa as I other parts of the world, "there are different women with their different problems and also their different methods of dealing with them." For one, it has been established that the condition of women have not improved much in patriarchal African society. The womanist ideology of mild dialogism has evidently not solved all the problem. If a radical corrective retaliation is a method that has served to correct some men, in some, cases, why not employ it? Woman right must be accepted as an essential part of human right, and it must be 'enforced'- if it has to be radically done. According to Martha, in Dangarembga's *She no longer weeps*, "we're all the same ... I and you and all the men and women out there" (130). The man/woman relationship must be 'reloaded'. Woman right and egalitarianism must be enforced, not merely desired or preached.

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