

Women in the Quandary of Osu Caste System: A Reflection on Ahmed Yerima's *Ala*

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Abstract

The resurgence of harmful practices in Nigeria and Africa in general has significantly hampered the growth of the female folks physically and psychologically. Women are victims of widowhood rites, domestic violence, early marriages and other discriminatory practices like the Osu caste system. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent of psychological and physical damage tradition has meted to women in some parts of the country. Ahmed Yerima's *Alat* shows the heightened otherness of women in the face of restrictive traditional practices appropriated by the alleged custodians of our common heritage. Adopting the post-colonial theory, this paper examines the socio-political and socio-cultural spaces of women in the Osu caste. This theory is useful in enlightening women on their predicaments as slaves or inferior in the society. The paper finds out that the exploitation of women and empowerment of men were laid down by tradition and can also be corrected by tradition. The research concludes that, Ahmed Yerima's *Ala* is a clarion call on the women to emancipate themselves in the face of the exploitative Osu tradition.

Keywords: Post-colonial theory, Osu Caste System, Otherness, Quandaries, Tradition.

Introduction

The patriarchal system in most African society has dwelled so much on gender stratification where women are variously placed in a disadvantaged position. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo asserts that this harmful practice “comes in different forms--battery, sexual molestation of the girl child, rape, acid bath, domestic violence, women trafficking, murder, kidnapping and forced prostitution”(6). The Osu caste system in this context is intricately woven with the predicaments of women, perpetrated by men soaked in the traditional coven of conspiracy. Francis Onwubuariri in his paper entitled “Appraising the Osu Caste system in Igbo Land...” states that

The concept of Osu and its inherent problems have been in existence since the antiquity of Igbo community (Nation). The problem is as old as the killing of twin babies, the killing of innocent children for developing first the upper incisor (teeth). The offering of human sacrifices, the problematic idea of reincarnation and others which are practices in the ancient Igbo nation and other nations in Nigeria and Africa at large. Thus, the Osu caste system has gone through several stages and generations (55).

Women are not only defenseless but are captives and hostages of the evil tradition in the eastern parts of the country. The situation has become so rife that discarding it is gradually becoming a far cry. In

view of this, J. O.L Ezeulastates that “The Osus were socially avoided, discontent, victimized, abused, dehumanized and denied fundamental human rights. In some schools, the children of the Osus are cajoled, mocked, spat upon, ridiculed by people and their leaders...” (6)

In all these situations, women happen to be objectified and relegated to background. They are denigrated as women, as slaves and citizens because of a designation they know little or nothing about. If a woman did not give birth to a male child, he will be labelled a social outcast and most times made to bear the repressed pride of her identity. If the husband of a woman dies prematurely in some traditional societies, the woman will be accused as though she had committed a crime. It is this multi-dimensional accusation levelled against women that this paper seeks to interrogates.

It has been observed by scholars and researchers that the Osu caste system emanated from the “Nri kingdom” following the traditional rites practiced in that kingdom. Corroborating this view, Onwuburiri writes that

...the origin of the Osu caste system in Igbo land is the view that the system originated from the Nri Kingdom. It is said that in the early days, Nri people possessed some hereditary powers and rites to proclaim cleansing to any kingdom where abominations are done in the past, consequently, any community or kingdom that refute or regret the cleansing by the Nri spiritualist or any village (community) that is unable to meet up with requirements needed for the cleansing, will be viewed as impure; and any community that is termed impure is referred to as an Osu or untouchable (61)

But the perspective of O.T Abia, Nneka Sophie, and Chrisantus Arichi is in contrast with Onwuburiri's statement. They posit that “Like most social system, the origin of the Osu caste is very vague, unclear, and there is no consensus as to when the system was established”(70). They state that “there are various ways in which the Osu status can be acquired. It can be acquired through birth by parents, inter marriage and commensality” (70). In most society, people are pronounced to be Osu because they are used to cleanse the sins of the community and to appease the gods of the land. This scenario is common among women, especially those who stood their ground in the face of the existential threats against their gender.

The belief system of the communities practicing the Osu caste system is grounded on the fact that a particular set of people are given derogatory designation for reasons best known to them. In some cases, these categories of persons are banished from their own land for a crime they know nothing about. The alleged Osus are denied so many pecuniary benefits like getting married to a free born described by the people as Diala. Diala is name given to a free born and people who are adjudged to be Bonafide citizen of such society. They are also not given opportunity to hold any chieftaincy title and not buried in the midst of the freeborn. Jude Mgbabuka writes that “The reason for this discrimination is because there is never a time an Osu is welcomed in the house of Diala. In many social gatherings, by the time kola nuts are broken and eaten, an Osu is made to be aware that he is a stranger being mainly to be tolerated” (18). In Ahmed Yerima's Ala, the women are maligned, subjugated and humiliated. In spite of the humiliation against women, they still have this strength of purpose needed to stifle the space of the male-controlled hegemons. This is why the women are revolting against the traditional belief system that seesthem as an existential threat. Life as an Osu is akin to misery, disillusionment and in chains.

Methodology

The work is a textual study of Ahmed Yerima's *Ala*. Hence, it involves a close appraisal of the play. To efficiently do this, this paper is guided by the theoretical yardsticks of post-colonial theory which will facilitate a dialogic and inter-textual study of the play. It relies on such critical sources as journals, interviews, articles, reviews, internet sources and newspapers in relevant areas. Drawing insight from Ahmed Yerima's *Ala* and relevant texts, it has been observed that the predicaments of women in most traditional society is increasing. It is anticipated that further research of other forms of women's predicament as *Osu* would be done to enlighten women in such stifled space.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is postcolonialism. The suitability of this theory is based on the fact that it enforces the concepts of resistance, otherness and embraces theories like Marxism and feminism. Edward Said *Orientalism*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" and Homi Bhabha's *Post Colonial Criticism* are works on postcolonial theory that interrogate the predicaments of the subaltern who in this context are the women. Lufti Hamadi states that "the theory is mainly based on what Said considers by western thinkers the false image of the orient fabricated by western thinkers as the primitive "other" in contrast with the civilized west" (39). Said examines the Orient in his book as primitive uncivilized other which he sees as exhibiting stark contrast to the metropolitan or civilised society. Said "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident" (qtd in Hamadi, 40). In *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin corroborate the assertion of Said in connection with the East/Islamic community by the West as opposite to the angel of reason and culture" (159). The division and the "spatial history of displacement" of the colonized shows the affirmation of Said position.

Spivak looks at the activities of the third world from the lenses of arts for art's sake. Diana Brydon is of the opinion that Spivak interrogates "how the third world subject is represented within western discourse" (1427). The theory dwells on the concepts of oppression, resistance, otherness and revamping the identities of the "subaltern" in the society. Postcolonial theory is all encompassing and embraces all other theories like Marxism, feminism, new historicism, deconstruction and eco-feminism. In all, postcolonial theory does not only aim at decolonizing the minds of the colonized but believes that the consequences of colonialism are still on the prowl. Idom T. Inyabri's position on postcolonialism is quite illuminating when he states that

Postcolonialism has become more of an endogenous cultural reading strategy that interrogates how individuals appropriate system of thoughts and signs to assert their personality not necessarily to live the life of another superior force or to subsist in the hegemony of a subject. Postcolonialism has become descriptive of a disposition to rise from the suffocation, even, of one's kind not necessarily from foreign, political and technological power (19).

Inyabri's position firmly interrogates the misery that has encapsulated the psyches of the people in our postcolonial space and how tradition has affected the indigenes in most African society. These consequences have taken the form of slavery (*Osu*), female oppression, brutality, communal wars, corruption and bloodshed. Postcolonial theory frowns at the misconstrued representation of the colonized.

The Plight of Women in Osu Caste System

The preoccupation of women in contemporary postmodern African socio-cultural landscape forms a major component of Ahmed Yerima's *Ala*. The predicaments of women in this context have to do with the most subjugated “other” in Africa and Nigeria in particular. The playwright deploys emotionally charged phrases to rejig the mentality of the people in the society. In their predicaments, they still protest against traditional bourgeoisie conventionality by exhibiting defiance against the restrictive taboos and anathemas like the Osu Caste system. Mezie Okoye and Asika Chiweuba hold that “The Diala is traditionally and socially abhorred and forbidden to many Osu. Intermarriage with Osu is an abomination” (89). They note that “All these names, Osu, Ohu, Ume Omori have the same connotation in Igbo land. The people referred to by these names are regarded as sub humans, unclean class or slaves” (90). For the writers to create a balance in the society, there must be a systemic psychological, emotional, physical war against capitalism. Frederick Engels and Lenin's submission are quite illuminating when they state that “the first premise for the emancipation of women is the reintroduction of the entire female sex into public industry” (50). In the same vein, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar state that

Besides bringing to the surface the psychological problems that women writers confronted, the feminist movement also provided a utopian vision of a world in which women might experience complete freedom. In verse, drama, fiction and expository prose women began to translate the visionary rhetoric of suffragism into Utopian works of art (976).

Ahmed Yerima deploys his arsenals “for the most part on the continuing confinement women confronted in an increasingly acquisitive society” (Gilbert and Gubar, 978). Women are confined and trapped in an avaricious societal convention that objectify and make them expendables in a society they all laboured to build. The women strive to interrogate the strength of womanhood in order to create a better, bigger and bolder versions of themselves. These socio-cultural degenerations are systematically frowned at by these women in multiple ways.

In our postcolonial space, there is this mythic and harmonious relationship that women have with the socio-political milieu of the 21st century evidenced in their agitations to bridging the gap between the free born and the Osus. It is as a result of this visionary position of women that Adriene Rich rightly observes the celebration of womanhood as a representation of the future “who must be more merciless than history...is significant because it draws on a dream on social transformation to create an image of a transformed self” (1617). Agbomma the heroine of the play asseverates:

...I fear today our stomachs may rumble, empty. But it is never too late for the depressed. They may still come, suppressed by arranged, forced burden on their lives. Because I outlive their fears, they call me the old blind witch, the prized acolyte of the evil spirit himself. I sit here at the crossroads to the market where I see the stark nakedness of wicked hearts, steadfast, raw and unflinching. I say in this darkened blindness. I see the folly of a cursed sucking aardvark race, unaware that it could suck little baby scorpions, and die too. I say, I see the broken hearts of brides and grooms, pained, twined. I hear wailings of children deprived of their inheritance. I see bleeding women beaten to a pulp asking for hot vengeance. Sometimes urged by my master, they gorge their pains I wet watery fangs sunk in deep into the victim's heart. I feel the eyes of angry impatient

children wishing death upon parents and siblings. I say I feel it all. From here, I see the restless battered pained women, angling for justice. Ha! I say, I am the arbiter of emptiness, the priestess of a scattered kingdom where love is dead and hatred looms (10)

This concept of “otherness” is implicit in Agbomma's statements: “The predicaments of women are multifaceted evidenced in the scathing and sarcastic position of Agbomma where “broken hearts of brides and grooms pained, twined.”; “bleeding women beaten to a pulp asking for hot vengeance” and “restless battered pained women, angling for justice” point to the woes of women in the society imposed by the Osu caste system.

In view of the aforementioned vantage point, Yerima sees women who are unburdened with motherhood, unsaddled with marital wars evidenced in their service to humanity. This supposition aligns firmly with the assertion of Orji-MbaOnwukah Benjamin who states that

The women have come to understand that hunger that confronts them is imposed by a particular people. Capitalism deliberately takes food away from the poor. This understanding helps the women to forge the armor of will against their oppressors, be they supposed friends or foes, indigenous people or foreigners (185)

In Osu caste system, the women are viewed in such a clime as the “other other”. Nwanyi who happens to be the foster mother of Jilemma and Agbomma, Jilemma's real mother suffered humiliation in the hands of the villagers and little children when her daughter Jilemma is accused of killing able bodied men in the society. The position of Nwanyi lays bare the quandaries of womanhood: “... But what can I say? After the first and second deaths, people's pity started to frail. I was stoned by little children when her third husband died, then togues started to wag after the fifth about witchcraft. So, I suggested that we go to my mother's village, but she refused” (38). The position of Onowu is a depiction of an insensitive chauvinistic society that is bent on relegating the woman to the lowest ebb as he speaks:

She would refuse as she was enjoying the attention of suitors and being the center of attraction at the burial of each son of Abame. Woman, we have come to the conclusion that you are also a witch. You know what we do to really bad evil witches like you and your daughter. Do you? (38).

Women are not only given names like Osu; they are also regarded as witches in most communities. The degrading part of it is that these women are banished with their families from the kindred for reasons best known to tradition. Expanding on this, Chris Baldick asserts that “post-colonial theory considers vexed cultural-political questions of national and ethnic identity, “otherness”, race, imperialism and language, during and after the colonial periods” (200).

In spite the combative exposition of Nwanyi, the society headed by the chief remains indifferent about the plight of the woman. Grace Okereke's position could be viewed as what this coterie of female critics, writers and characters consider repulsive when she states that

There is no redeeming quality in the assertive female in the combative male eyes. It is a confrontational dialogic that serves as a paradigm of male gender animosity and antagonism when his authority is threatened by female awareness and revolt. The confrontation within gender politics pits patriarchy against African feminism, and is often played out within articulatory space and quite often degenerates into outrage (266).

Women are victims of oppression in a male-controlled hegemon as enunciated by Okereke. In spite of all the dehumanizing practices meted to women, they still crave to carve a niche for themselves. The Osus in eastern Nigeria are treated as second class citizens and deprived of the basic fundamental human rights. Even women's children are thrown into the bush to decay as Agbomma rightly observed "Ekwensu is man and spirit mingled. He is so understanding, not like those with rules, so wicked they would throw the bathwater and the child into the bush to decay" (16). Within the postcolonial hermeneutics, Agbomma's disillusionment and complaints are product of a particular history. Since postcolonial theory encompasses all other theories, including Marxism, it reminds us of Karl Marx assertion that "it is not our consciousness that shapes our existence but our social existence that shapes our consciousness". A woman who has been designated as an Osu is seen as a beast of burden and practically stripped of all sources of livelihood as seen in the discussion below:

UGUEGBULEM: What kind of a man do you think you are? First, you say you took food and palm wine to the mad woman of the market street, and then you asked her and her Ekwensu spirit to help you steady your hand. May Ala forbid. You go too close to the woman. I don't like it. And they say that she is mad (26).

IHEADEGWU: The old woman is not mad. She speaks well if you listen. I don't know but always, I feel drawn to her. Like I was born to assist her (26).UGUEGBULEM: Tufia! Take water with a pinch of salt and rinse your mouth. No one comes close to her. We only leave food or throw fruits at her from afar (26).

A woman as an Osu is maltreated as a social outcast and made to bear the odium inferiority and repressed pride of her existence. Violet Oparaocha asserts that "In Igboland, Osu is an aspect of repugnant social stratification, so poignant that belonging to it reduces the subject to a state of *Infra diignitatem* (below dignity). It predates the colonial era and possibly ranks among the world largest-surviving starters of discrimination" (25). In most cases, women are given so many derogatory names and earmarked for ritual purposes as demanded by the Igwe.

Agbomma who happens to be a slave and a woman tells us in her discourse between her and the Igwe in this manner

IGWE: Very well. Let someone go and fetch her. (A palace guard leaves). Now tell us, blind woman why you stay in the bush along the way to the market (37).

AGBOMMA: I stay there to find solace. No one wants me except Iheadegwu. He brings me food, and drinks. Kindness does not exist in this village. Akamefuna told me so, before she died, but I did not believe her, I was very naïve then. But now my heart can read the lines on the brow of human beings or feel the stress in his voice and knows what he buries within. I beg you Igwe, do not take advantage of my hopelessness to look down on my womanhood (37).

No matter how assertive a woman is in traditional African, she is never given a space by the men to speak for herself. Corroborating this view, JosephatAdogaOdey and Patrick Odey Ogar aver that "The experience of the people in Nigeria is far from being ideal because of the frustration and disillusionment caused by oppression" (94). If it happens that a woman is an Osu, she will be relegated to the lowest rung of the ladder. Charles Mezie-Okoye Chukwurah and Jude Asika

Chinweuba affirm the predicament of women when they state that “...their everyday experience is really a big shame of the society. One of them, ChinyereOlumba, a graduate of University of Nigeria, Nsukka, married with three children was thrown out of her matrimonial home and the children taken away from her when the husband discovered her Osu status” (91). JosephatAdogaOdey and Fidelis Otosi assert that “The male controlled society in Africa and Nigeria in particular uses power as an instrument of negation to frustrate the dreams and aspiration of women by instituting reign of terror and disillusionment” (115). Women are the real victims of this autocratic traditional belief because their identities have been stripped in two ways: a house wife and not given a voice.

Agbomma and her daughter, Jelemma are victims of these restricted practices. The death of these able-bodied men is the consequence of the sins perpetrated by Igwe on Agbomma. Hence, the vengeance of Ala befalls the kingdom. In spite of the fact that Igwe raped Agbomma who is adjudged to be an Osu, he is not in any way ridiculed the way an Osu is mocked in the society. Okarama informs the people that “We shall cleanse the land. We shall cleanse the Igwe for touching an Osu. We shall cleanse Jilemma before she can perform her rites as the Princess of our land” (50). The burden of womanhood is quite oblivious when the main patriarchal figures in the play, Okarama and Ibe interrogate the authenticity of Agbomma as an Osu and a woman who finally becomes the wife of the Igwe after unveiling the ordeals that led to the birth of Jilemma who also is a thorn in the flesh of the villagers because of the men that mysteriously died in the course of wooing her. The Igwe is also part of this patriarchal dance of shame when he openly confesses that his daughter will be used for ritual purposes whenever he journeys to meet his ancestors. Yerima creatively puts it thus

IGWE: The ways of the gods are really different. I am happy that my daughter was found. I can now be reassured of complete restful ritual when I pass on to join my ancestors. The feet of my son Izu will also be washed before entering the palace of an Igwe (50).

AGBOMMA: Ala is really a female goddess then. Her anger and Jealous knows no bound.

ONOWU: What do we do now?

OKARAMA: We shall cleanse the land. We shall cleanse the Igwe for touching an Osu. We shall cleanse Jelemma before she can perform her rites as the princess of the land (50)

David Mikailu holds that “Patriarchal norms and practices are observed to have enforced some cultural obligations on that woman which inhibits self-actualization...” (278). This also reaffirms Josephat Adoga Odey and Fidelis Utsu's position on the division such practices must have caused in the society when they assert that “This situation is brought about by greed, corruption and bad leadership initiatives coupled with the parasitic relationship existing between the leaders and the led appropriated by social stratification” (119). The mention of Osu in the community conjures up derogatory, disparaging and offensive image about a woman as a slave.

OKARAMA: Yes, we shall, in ten days' time, appease Ala with a small festival. A befitting house will be built for Agbomma far from the palace. Close to her... (51)

AGBOMMA: Close to her kind? Why?

OKARAMA: I wanted to say close to her people. Woman, please let me deliver the massage as I received it. (Pause) The Igwe and Agbomma must never meet as man and wife till they die (51)

Women are subjected to multiple dehumanizing practices and their predicaments have earmarked patriarchy as an existential threat to their existence. Even in chains as an Osu and a woman, they have vowed to be resilient in the face of oppression.

The women have seen the need that it is only them that can liberate themselves. To them, patriarchy is a belief system that should be jettisoned in all spheres. Agbomma's position reminds us of real postcolonial woman who has vowed to protect woman and motherhood as seen in her response to Okarama's comments

AGBOMMA: Why? I was good enough to be raped, my child is good enough to perform the washing of legs ceremony for the old and new Igwe, but I am not good enough to be called his wife? (Chuckles) And now I have my own house ... and my own people. I must not think Jilemma as my child then (51),

The belief that as an Osu you do not have place among the free born is very overt in the tradition of the people. It is as a result of this that Josephat Adoga Odey, God'sgift Ogban Uwen and Patrick Odey Ogar assert that "The uninspiring attitude among the masses has led to the breakdown of institutions" (55). Efforts to wrestle tradition by Agbomma "I don't want a place. I want my place...this place is mine, too" is met with the stiff resistance by Onowu who lays it bare to Agbomma in this manner: "An Osu is an Osu... and a freeborn, a freeborn. Even the gods know this. I am sorry. Our hands are tied. The gods will find fault in our decision if we act otherwise and the consequence could be fatal. The Osu matter will die one day... but not now ...not today (53).

Conclusion

Women in Africa and Nigeria in particular are easy preys to many ritual practices and other forms of sacrifices. In most traditional societies, especially in the Igala kingdom of Kogi State, Nigeria. Inikpi who happened to be a woman was needed to cleanse the Igala land, so she was buried alive. In the domestic sphere, women are subjected to debasing widowhood rites for crimes that are discriminatively legislated and sanctioned by forces of patriarchy. Why is it always women, it could be asked? The Osu caste system is a systemic humiliation and existential threat to womanhood. It is against this background that the analysis done so far in this paper interrogates the oppressive regime of patriarchy. Ahmed Yerima's *Alais* a cogent representation of womanhood in Osu caste system, unravelling the restrictive traditional precept appropriated by patriarchy and which undermines the dignity of womanhood in Nigerian society and the relationship that exists among the freeborn and the slaves. Even with the abrogation of slavery in most parts of the world, it is quite paradoxical that Africans frown at the institution of slavery practiced by developed countries but are the chief perpetrators of slavery like Osu and xenophobia which happen to be the first cousins of slavery. The paper has also observed with dismay that the real victims of the Osu are the women. This assessment shows that whereas critical scholarship exists in the Osu Caste system, there is a noticeable lack of significant attention on the predicament of women as Osu. Ahmed Yerima's *Ala* is a play that adeptly exposes and frowns at the manner women are subjugated in traditional African society practicing Osu

system.

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