CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND PEACE BUILDING: 
THE GENDER QUESTION IN 
OLAMMA BY TRACIE EZEAJUGH

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Abstract

The paper examines the strategic approaches adopted by women and the socio-cultural obstacles that impede women’s active participation in conflict resolution and peace building process as seen in the play understudy. African nations have been ravaged by conflict, resulting in destabilization, displacement, and infrastructural destruction, all of which have gender-specific consequences. Women are often portrayed as victims of conflict; and in large part, they are. Yet they are largely neglected once peace occurs. Despite active role in war, women are often neglected in the post-conflict situation and in peace negotiations. Studies have shown that despite the fact that women play active roles in developing coalitions across fighting groups within and outside Nigeria, women are neither represented nor consulted in peace negotiations. Often discrimination against women in post-conflict land settlement buttresses this fact. This is essential for sustaining peace.

Keywords: Nigeria, Africa, Women, War, Conflict Resolution, Peace Building

Introduction

Conflict has become a recognizable feature in almost every human society. In Nigeria, the activities of the multinational oil companies have ushered in various manifestations of conflict, resulting from intra/intercommunity feud, communities agitation for resource control, fulfillment of social exchange obligations and widespread protests over the monumental degradation of the Niger Delta environment and the repressive measures adopted by the Nigerian state in suppressing the inhabitants from expressing their displeasure. According to Ering Simon Odey

In communities where oil exploration and production activities are carried out, the consequences are great; deforestation, erosion, acid rains, and destroyed farmlands, are the main signposts for this gift of nature. Activities of these companies caused the pollution of the creeks and destroyed aquatic lives. And when there are spillages,
the losses are unquantifiable, for example, the Mobil oil spill, on Ibeno shoreline, in January 2013; and several other oil spill incidents on August 3rd and 24th, November 9th, December 16th and 19th, all in 2012. Texaco oil spill and blowout caused a colossal loss of lives, destroyed lives and damaged the ecosystem of the area and destroyed the fishing gears. Adequate compensation and clean up were not done. All these aggravated the agitations which resulted to a lot of crises in the region (422).

Suleimon Opafofa says that

Some of the causes of terrorism are unwillingness to explore peaceful means of seeking redress such as consultation, dialogue and compromise; failure of peaceful means of redressing grievances; instinct of aggression and domination; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; incompatibility of conflicting ideologies; subjugation, oppression and exploitation; social inequalities; frustration; instinct of self-preservation and instinct of vengeance (17-18).

These various causes of conflict have a far-reaching but negative effect on the womenfolk and as such, women should be made to participate in conflict resolution and peace building process. According to Damilola Taiye Agbalajobi:

Armed conflict and its aftermath affect women’s lives in ways that differ from the impact on men. Men in communities under attack tend to abandon public spaces to avoid being conscripted, attacked, or taken hostage. This increases the burden placed on women to hold communities together in the absence of men at war (9).

On the contrary, women are pressurized to accept their gender roles in the home front as mothers, home makers and care givers while the men carry on with important societal roles of conflict resolution and peace building. This study argues that women by their nature adopt non-confrontational or violent free strategies when tackling issues of conflict and peace building.

**Theoretical Framework**

Numerous definitions have been offered for feminism. However, Bell Hooks’ definition connects favourably with the objective of this paper. She says “simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (2). Hooks further says that feminism is not all about women trying to negotiate equality with men, which is a concept used by both individuals and
patriarchy. Rather, feminism develops from a consciousness that underscores the importance of learning about patriarchy as “a system of domination, institutionalized and perpetrated over women, making them to be exploited and oppressed” (23).

Patriarchy, simply put, is the rule of the male—father/son. Patriarchy is a system that continually subjugates the woman. It derives its source of strength from socio-cultural and, often, political practices that define the social fabric and structure of the society where it is entrenched. Engaging this text from this point of view, Ezeajugh draws attention to the changing faces of control that emanates directly from the system of patriarchy that a society, Umueze community in this context, practices. Johnson provides a vivid conception of control that relates to this idea. She says

Under patriarchy, control shapes not only the broad outline of social life but also men’s inner lives. It does this through its central place in the definition of masculinity: a real man is in control or at least gives the impression of being in control. The more men see control as central to their sense of life, well-being worth, and safety, the more driven they feel to go after it and organize their inner and outer lives around it (27).

In the gender relations that Ezeajugh sets up in the text, we find Johnson’s argument relevant that since men’s control over women is what patriarchal manhood is all about, a reversal is often deemed unnatural. She says that:

A woman perceived as controlling a man is typically labelled a ‘castrating bitch’ or a ‘ball-buster’, and the man she supposedly controls is looked down upon as ‘hen-pecked’, a ‘pussy-whipped’ and barely a man at all. But there are no insulting terms for a man who controls a woman—by having the last word, and not letting her work outside the home, deciding when she’ll have sex, or limiting her time with other women, or the woman he controls. There is no need for such words because men controlling women is what patriarchal manhood is all about (27-28).

In Africa, gender roles assigned to man and woman are generally accepted as essence of the gender. Lekan Balogun says that:

Being a social construct, the strength of patriarchy is predicated on the society’s assigned roles for both male and female; masculinity and the predominant for the male and the female subordinated in order to legitimize the male’s control and power.
The system also feeds on social belief, religious affiliation and in recent time being promoted through the media (32).

In order to challenge this age-long social and cultural practice, Ezeajugh contrives the play in the form of discourse hinged on the theoretical framework of the feminist/womanist hue. Based, however, on the cultural tropes she has adopted, her idea of discourse can be examined from the definition offered by Burr who explains that “a discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event (or a person or class of persons), a particular way of representing it or them in a certain light”(48). This definition helps us to view the textual narrative in the light of a contemporary engagement with an issue that is still very recent and relevant. It also helps to foreground the work in the mould of social construction that bothers on enabling a better understanding of how a discourse, of this nature, shapes understanding of people and objects. As Burr explains it “a productive line of enquiry has focused upon the performative [and literary] qualities of discourse, that is, what people are doing with their talk or writing, what they are trying to achieve” (47).

The Role of Women in Peace Building Process: A study of Olamma by Ezeajugh

The play opens with the arrival of emissaries from Ugwunzu who feel aggrieved over the murder of one of their daughters by an Umungwu hunter, Odidika. The visitors do not waste time in revealing the resultant tragic consequences that await the town of Umungwu for the sacrilege committed by Odidika:

ODOGWU: We are emissaries from Ugwunzu the mighty town on the hills. We have come to place peace and war in your hands. The choice is yours… (3).

The Ugwunzu warriors made it known to Umungwu community that they will visit again in a market weeks’ time to collect a maiden and a young boy as a replacement of their deceased daughter. As soon as the warriors depart, the men of the community assemble to tackle the problem at hand. Duru Nwosu stands up and addresses the gathering:

Duru Nwosu: Men of Umungwu, I am worried. What has happened to us? Are we no longer men? Why did we agree to the demands made by Ugwunzu warriors without resistance? In the days, when men were men and the name “Umungwu” struck fear into the hearts of our neighbours, such an act would have been
inconceivable. What has happened to the brave warriors of Umungwu? (6).

Here, Ezeajugh is quick to make us realize how patriarchal culture has conditioned men to resort to violence as an ultimate tool of conflict resolution. The fictional world of Olamma clearly establishes the social milieu of a traditional African, nay Igbo society, with all its mores, values and tradition, which dehumanize womenfolk. According to Nkechi Okadigwe, “Ezeajugh condenses and recreates the Igbo history in Olamma and subtly challenges the woman of today to rise up against any cultural or social bias against female (203).

The playwright strongly condemns individuals who take advantage of the economically disadvantaged position of women. Odidika, the murderer has been mandated to provide a maiden and a boy for the Ugwunzu people. Actually, he is expected to provide them from his homestead, but, events soon reveal that contrary to speculation, he summons Agbomma, his late brother’s wife who was duly informed by Odidika that the clan has chosen her daughter, Olamma as the maiden to be given to Ugwunzu people to avert the looming war. Naturally, this will attract interest and speculations, particularly when Odidika, the culprit in question has several daughters that could be used to appease the Ugwunzu people. Agbomma wonders why her only daughter has been chosen by the clan when Odidika’s daughters are still alive.

Odidika’s nefarious acts show that he has lost his humanity. Despite the fact that he sold his nephew, Obiechina into slavery, he conspires with some elders to give Olamma, his late brother’s only daughter as a compensation for his crime. He says:

Odidika: I have sent for Agbomma my late brother’s wife. I am going to tell her that the clan has chosen her daughter, Olamma as the maiden to be given to Ugwunzu people to avert a war. I have also sent for the widow Mgbafor. I will also tell her that her only son Onwubiko has been chosen by the clan for the same purpose. I want you all to collaborate with me in everything. I will say here this evening (11).

Here, Ezeajugh does not only present a character who lacks conscience, but also a sadist who derives joy in manipulating his fellow humans. Odidika’s decision to exploit women shows that he is actually living up to cultural prescriptions that are cherished in Western society--aggressiveness, male dominance and female subordination--and they are using physical force as a means to enforce that dominance. The pathetic experiences of Agbomma and Mgbafor confirm the postulations of several scholars that women are worst hit in situations of violent conflict.

Agbomma is paradigmatic of an oppressed widow. She is a courageous female character representing the oppressed woman in the society who has no
voice and is not ready to be cowed in or placed under restrictions. Her will power gives our women folk the hope for the future. Her protest is unequivocal and to the point. She says:

**Agbomma:** Maazi Okigbo, this respect you are talking about, don’t you want it for your daughter? The person who killed a daughter of Ugwunzu has two daughters. Does he not want them to have respect? Let him send his daughters to Ugwunzu. But no, it has to be my only child because I have nobody to speak for me. I am only a woman. My husband is dead and my only surviving son was kidnapped under mysterious circumstances last year. What can I do? Who will speak for me? (15).

Ezeajugh also shows the fact that men lack the unique opportunities women have for conflict resolution. They engage in many atrocities, which ordinarily ought to have been classified as terrorist acts. Some of the atrocious acts are killing, maiming, and achievement of aims through deception, depriving people of their wealth, property and resources etc. These atrocious acts constitute a threat to the peace and stability of the society.

The cultural belief of the people is aligned with the celebration of the virtues of women as nation-builders and pillars of trust and support in the society. The story progresses to substantiate the fact that women are intelligent, wise and competent human beings capable of contributing meaningfully to the growth and development of the society. Olamma of course escaped from the hands of Ugwunzu warriors and runs to Matron Florence Mbano. The white woman Matron Florence trained her and she becomes an important personality in her community bringing changes and modern development. Thus through the efforts of women, killing of twins and many other harmful traditional practices were abolished. Above all, education and empowerment of women received serious attention. Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh’s feminism moves from radical confrontationist to womanist/accommodationist.

Olamma’s journey back home to save her people from the deadly plague, clearly demonstrates a high level of love, compassion and sagacity expected of a woman, who understands that life can be lived anew in the younger generation, provided they are protected and properly nurtured; that it can also be meaningful and progressive when individuals are allowed room to aspire for and reach out to the highest level of their potentials without being hindered by unprogressive ritual and traditional barriers which, to say the least, are fast becoming obsolete and out of fashion, especially in a fast changing world, as succinctly given expression by foreign value and religion that have helped in eradicating the killing of twins among other negative cultural practices in the Umungwu community. Olamma says: “Mama! How can you be comfortable with oppression and suppression? Anyway, don’t worry, when I return from my studies, I will address some of these issues” (92). Fortunately, fortune smiles back on Olamma as she not only gains respect and dignity. She thus becomes a celebrity. Olamma is declared a pace-
setter by the title conferred on her by the same male folks who have persecuted her earlier on:

Duru Nwosu: (standing up) Olamma, our daughter. You have brought much honour to us. Our people say that when the right hand washes the left hand, the left hand should in turn wash the right hand. Our community has met and given us the mandate to honour you with the title of Onwa na Etiri Umungwu. You will be conferred with the title during the forthcoming Asala festival.

(107)

Olamma’s honour with a title exclusively reserved for men in Igboland is the playwright’s subtle and implied way of saying that at a time of moral disorder when obnoxious men like Duru Nwosu have destroyed the nation, then a woman such as Olamma who has the pluck and determination must be given an opportunity to take over the task of nation building and restore order. According to Nkechi Okadigwe “This action is unheard of even in Igbo modern society but confidently and humbly, Olamma achieves this prestigious position for herself and for the entire womenfolk” (204). Olamma provides interesting instances of a woman’s role in nation building and conflict resolution. Olamma’s marriage to an Ugwunzu man paves way for a lasting solution to the feud between the two warring communities. At last, she has been able to achieve what the warriors could not do. Mgbafor says:

Mgbafor: Yes Olamma has succeeded where even warriors failed. She has made peace between our land and Ugwunzu. As in-laws, Ani the earth goddess forbids us from harming one another. Olamma has really brought peace and development to Umungwu. She is a good girl, a worthy daughter of our land (199-120).

Therefore, it is beyond every reasonable doubt that Ezeajugh has written this play to show how women can help to purge the land of filth, war, diseases and evil, by their act of compassion and love. It also aligns with eco-feminist perception regarding women and Nature, which sees violence against women in terms of metaphor for pollution of the earth.

Conclusion

Olamma is a play set in the pre-colonial Igbo society which looks at the root causes of conflict in the society and those institutions and practices that propagate these conflicts, and as well encourage sharp primitive practices such as selling people into slavery, internecine wars; exchange of women for ritual purpose, human sacrifice and above all killing of twins. Ezeajugh, in this play,
also demonstrates the important roles of women as peace negotiators and peace educators in both families and society.

References


