

Vowing in Tears: a Cross-Gender Interpretation of Human Rights Abuse in Sofola's *wedlock of the gods*

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Abstract

*Many scholars have examined the play, *Wedlock of the Gods*, but most readings of the text looked at it from the perspective of feminism and, in this case, the right for a woman to choose her marriage partner. While it cannot be denied that this theme is discernible in the text, this paper attempts to demonstrate that the burden of human rights abuse in the play is not only shared by both genders, but that the chief male character, Uloko appears to be more "sinned against than sinning," to use Hazlitt's popular phrase. In the text, he is made the butt of society, a persona non grata from where spirals the tapestry of violence witnessed in the play.*

Keywords: *abuse, gender, human, interpretation & rights.*

Introduction

The notion of human rights and its abuse are ancient and yet emergent. They are reflected in oral tales and mythologies, debated by classical philosophers and even highlighted in classical plays like Sophocles' *Antigone*. The issue of human rights abuse is still a fresh and disturbing one, with innumerable groups championing its cause the world over and particularly in Africa, where certain inflexible traditions and intolerable regimes appear to muzzle individual's freedom. Therefore, human rights are tested in places marked by extreme conservatism, and where the norms of life remain relatively fixed over a considerable period. This paper seeks to evaluate Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* from cross-gender perspective as against its dominant reading as a feminist case-study.

Most of the previous studies of the play appear to hinge their argument on how Ogwoma, the lead female character of the text was forced into an unwanted marriage, which result in her suffering both emotional and physical pains. Although the argument is sustainable, *Wedlock of the Gods* is undoubtedly foregrounded by weightier issues than feminism alone can account for. In his work, *The Mind of Africa*, Abraham (1962:11 – 12) posits that:

In period of political transition, quick decisions and adaptation, which African countries already find themselves, changes are strenuous, and many events are liable to appear bizarre. Their underlying rationales (for culture implies rationales) and those silent adjustments which decide what are preserved and what are discarded, can only be brought to the

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surface by a clear exposition of the theoretical complex which sustains the culture involved.

The above fact is what Zulu Sofola seems to present and clarify in dramatic terms. *Wedlock of the Gods* is set in a period of transition, a period where romantic love, which is clearly a new idea and stranger in traditional African marital thought (being personified by Ogwoma and Uloko), seeks to demonstrate that the traditional marriage system, where parents arrange marriage for their children based on socio-economic consideration alone, requires urgent reconsideration and overhauling. Ogwoma and Uloko in the play, struggle, even at the cost of self-sacrifice, to show that culture is not immutable but is receptive to change and permutation of history. Although the burden of proving this point is shared by Ogwoma and Uloko, this paper argues that Uloko seems to be more drastically deprived than her female lover. What is at issue is not patriarchal domination of matriarchy but a case of human rights abuse of both sexes in which the major male character is made a persona non grata by the subsisting marital custom.

Synopsis

Wedlock of the Gods, first published in 1972 by the first Nigerian female playwright, centres on the obstacles placed on the way of two lovers, Uloko and Ogwoma, in order to make their marriage dreams intractable. Contrary to her will, Ibekwe forced his daughter Ogwoma to marry Adigwu as against Uloko whom she truly loves. Adigwu is able to pay higher bride price than Uloko, and Ibekwe needs a lot of money to perform ritual sacrifice needed to save his son, Edozie from dying, as well as get the same boy traditionally initiated into manhood. But the marriage does not last as Adigwu dies within three years of the union. To avoid the fulfillment of the tradition of leviration in which Ogwoma will be automatically transferred to Adigwu's brother as wife, Uloko and Ogwoma whose love is still firm, not want to take chances, quickly consummated their marital intention with pregnancy, two months into her mourning period. The knowledge of this action causes unprecedented uproar in the whole town because no man customarily touches a woman in mourning until after three months. Adigwu's mother Odibei who does not believe that her son died naturally now finds enough evidence to prove her suspicion. She believes that Adigwu died because of Ogwoma's harlotry. To avenge Adigwu's death, she hypnotizes Ogwoma after much threat gets her poisoned in a fit of anger. Uloko matchets Odibei to death and kills himself with the remainder of the poison that killed Ogwoma.

Early interpretations

There is no single way of reading or interpreting a literary text because any given text can answer to a diversity of knowledge. The play, *Wedlock of the Gods* has been the subject of many critical enquires, but two ideas have so far been given undue attention in criticism. The ideological purists appear to have qualms with the play on the ground that one does not know on which side is the playwright. Chris Dunton (1992:36) in summarizing the views of Omotoso, Etherton and, Hagher, notes that:

Ogwoma and Uloko's passionate conviction may be moving in a committed performance, but as a play on the clash between value systems, *Wedlock* has none of the clarity or thoughtfulness even of such a Romantic conception as Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*.

The whole point being made here is that the play is foggy in terms of ideological persuasion. Omotoso (1973:59) claims that the "ending of the play perpetuates credence in the supernatural", but if as he also points out that the play depicts "the repressive aspect of tradition", it means that the playwright has a standpoint. Her treatment of the hero and the heroine of the play does not show that the playwright works after the custom of the play's society, but that she shows sympathy with the direction the society is moving, which is the need for individual to have a say in who becomes their wife or husband.

However, those who examine the text from the feminist perspective do not share the idea of ideological haziness. They see the play, according to Uko (2006:82 – 93) "as an unmitigated study of the suppression of the female gender. For this group, emphasis of the play is on the "schismatic, rather than the synergistic relationship between the sexes". For the feminist analysts, the woman is marginalized and turned into an object of trade. The play is treated as a reaction against patriarchy. Somadina Mbajioju (2010: 30) even submits that this "patriarchal domination" is aided by women.

The Human Right Perspective

Wedlock of the Gods is not confusing in terms of perspective neither is it merely an elaboration of the anatomy of female oppression. The text is essentially an exploration of impediments to human rights and the daring involved in the pursuit of freedom. It posits that the unbending forces of communal system of living do not obliterate the notion of individuality. And this is why people break taboos in the first instance. In an interview with Ossie Enekwe, Sofola (1972/1981: 61) states her fundamental intention of writing the play thus:

But the thing is that the primary issue which I was questioning was – is it possible that in the African scene a genuine love can exist between members of the opposite sex to the extent where, if that love is threatened, they resist with all they have?

Sofola truly realized this intention as in the play. In supporting this view, Uka (1978: 24), opines that the politics of the self and its sovereignty as well as the “pursuit of justice and the perennially touchy issue of freedom” is allowed to play out within the context of love. For Ogwoma and Uloko love is supreme and must be given premium value in consideration of marital union. But unjust and limiting socio-cultural arrangements do not support this view. The idea of Ogwoma following her heart in terms of choosing her marital partner is negated by the social morality and conception that “a man’s daughter is a source of wealth to him”. (Act I Scene I). This view which reverberates throughout the text is the major cultural impediment that robs both Ogwoma and Uloko of self-worth. It leads to the reification, inferiorization and commodification of the young woman, even as it clarifies the capitalist undertone of the traditional marital system. In Act I scene I, Ogwoma says that she was “tied like a goat and whipped along the road to a man” she “hated”. Udo informs their kinsmen that Ogwoma was led to her husband protesting and that he “did not as much as look through the door to see if she was tied and carried to Adigwu or whipped along the way like a ram to the altar”. Udo’s fruitless effort to dissuade Ibekwe from forcing Ogwoma to marry Adigwu against her will signifies that Ibekwe’s kinsmen never gave their consent to the idea of commodifying their daughter. The text suggests that Ibekwe traded her daughter’s happiness in order to maximize his capitalist interest and to cover up economic laziness that appears to run in his family line. Ibekwe points to his financial weakness where he tells his kinsmen:

Death hears nothing. My son, Edozie, was nearly dead when the oracle stated very clearly that a seven-year-old ram had to be sacrificed to Ikenga, our family god. In addition, it also stated that he must be initiated immediately into manhood before he could recover. We had no money for these things... (Act 2 Scene 1).

This shows that Ibekwe is not man enough to tackle his financial obligations and the idea is given sufficient weight by Okolie who in exchange of words tells Ibekwe:

Oh yes, it is thus a spineless man speaks. You thought that in my presence the Onowu family would carry you hand and foot as it carried your hopeless father. (Act 2 Scene 1).

It is, therefore, Ibekwe’s economic laziness that led him as he says, to give “my daughter away against my wish” to a marriage of misery. Ogwoma harps on her parents’ greed for money when she tells her mother:

You knew about me and Uloko. You could have given me to him and received whatever money he could bring. But no, you were hungry for money... (Act 1 Scene 2).

The issue of inferiorization is not peculiar to Ogwoma. The idea of exorbitant bride wealth inflicts a terrible psychological wound on Uloko's psyche, for when Ibekwe places a price tag which Uloko cannot afford, he simply turns the young man into an economic nonentity. And this feeling is watered by Adigwu when he pays the money to the slight of the young man. This act of intimidation throws Uloko into a state of paranoid. Nothing is as painful to Uloko as watching the young woman she loves being taken forcibly away from him by another man on account of economic superiority. Neither Ibekwe nor Adigwu is charitable to Uloko and, therefore, any action he takes to assert himself from the shame the two men put on him is both justified and permissible.

Love enables one to tune to another's emotional frequency and responds to such with stimulating and gripping manner. If access is denied to a lover it can lead to sickness, gloom and anguish of the soul. Uloko and Ogwoma's love is passionate, committed and intimating for it is love built over a considerable time. Cristina (1949:42) submits that:

Love is not something carnal and evil to be ashamed of, but something pure and beautiful. It is not a temptation to be struggled against but a great ethical force which can protect man from lust and even strengthen and purify the moral will.

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, the question of romantic love is celebrated as a fundamental issue which Africans must accept as one of the challenges of modern life. Love as an essential factor in marriage is one of the aftermaths of colonialism. In the traditional African society, a complex of forces helps to shape the institution of marriage. These include the caste system, life chances, ability to cater for the woman and her family. In other words, economic status and social acceptance are the major determining factors in marriage. A man must be seen as being capable of taking care of his wife and family before he is deemed qualified to marry. In fact, Kum (2010) notes that marriage in traditional African society, "always involve the transfer of dowry – cash, goods or services – from the groom or his family to the bride's family." This basic necessity is primarily the reason parents arrange marriage for their children.

Antipodal to this, is the issue of love being an essential factor to consider in marriage. A belief in the western world is that two persons get married because they are in "love" with each other and that romantic love should be the foundation upon which marriage is built. This idea is what Ogwoma and Uloko champion in the *Wedlock of the Gods*, but because change is not easily accepted, they had to sacrifice their lives in order to jolt their society into a new form of consciousness – to re-evaluate the notion of marriage based on bridal wealth and leviration.

When the untimely death of Adigwu leverages Uloko and Ogwoma, they throw caution to the wind, slap the tradition of mourning period and or leviration in the face by meeting and quickly consummating their love with a pregnancy. When their perceived untoward breaking of taboo is discovered, neither of the two is ashamed in spite of the overweening condemnation of their act in public. In fact, parental vituperations and attacks as well as Odibei's threats instead of making Uloko and Ogwoma to hide their faces in shame, rekindle their resolve to face the consequences of their action fearlessly. Neither Uloko is dissatisfied with his action, nor is Ogwoma,

instead their love becomes buoyed by the obstacles. They remain unruffled in the face of increasing verbal and physical assaults and synergistically shout their defiance against inhibiting tradition. For Ogwoma, the idea of marrying Adigwu's brother is unthinkable because for her love thrives on liberty. Their consistency in defying tradition in order to realize love's essence endows them with nobility of character. In their hearts, there is only one norm, love, and everything must yield to it. Their conception of love as a fundamental human right constrains them to face the challenges and the price inherent in it.

It is the blockage of their love that brings the two into conflict of obligation and opposition of interests with their parents and especially Adigwu's mother, Odibei. Each group vows to outdo the other in the quest to ensure the triumph of interest. Odo (2007:34) reasons that, "the inassailable power of love constrains Uloko and Ogwoma to be willing to end their lives in its defense." Uloko regards Ogwoma as "the beauty spot of the jungle. The one whose glance tames the wildest beast" (Act 1 Scene 1). And as such with her:

The world is full of songs. The heart thrills with joy. Everything is aglow (Act 1 Scene 1).

For Uloko, Ogwoma is a precious stone that must be jealously guarded. His love for her is so penetrating that he finds her inviting in all circumstances, including the dehumanizing condition of her mourning. When Udo tells Uloko that his recent "abominable activities with Ogwoma have disturbed a lot of waters" (Act 2 Scene 1) in a bid to instill fear and shame into him and cause him to listen to traditional wisdom, which is to "make clean the peace you have soiled", the young man minces no words in telling him that he has no regret. He reminds him that he once told him that "there was no other woman for me" apart from Ogwoma. Since everything and everyone humiliated him in the first instance to make Ogwoma Adigwu's wife, he is now ready to get the peace so terribly disturbed "until Ogwoma becomes my wife" (Act 2 Scene 2).

On her own part, Ogwoma's love for Uloko is so engulfing that she sees him in all things, in the market, farm, blowing wind, every tree and even in birds' songs. Every whisper is Uloko's voice. Her commitment to Uloko's love compels her to inform Anwasia that she is prepared to be "buried alive" than to "become Okezie's wife". (Act 1 Scene 2).

The above suggests that the tradition of leviration which Okezie stands for, is more loathsome to Ogwoma than high bride price, which in the first place, separated her from Uloko. Automatic transfer as wife to Adigwu's brother is unthinkable, disagreeable and must be rebuffed at all costs. It is a painful idea that must not be negotiated at all. Hear Ogwoma's lamentation:

What have I done to them? I have fought for the past four years to marry a man I love, but these people will not let it be. I was tied and whipped along the road to Adigwu. Now that God has freed me they still say I am his brother's wife (Act 1 Scene 2).

The culture of leviration is an attempt to conquer the lovers roundly, but they are not willing to accept this final obstacle to their only life's ambition. This spells out the urgency with which the lovers consummate their love with pregnancy, even during Ogwoma's mourning period. The period which Ogwoma lived with Adigwu is frustrating both for her and Uloko that none of them is willing to permit any other conspiracy against their dream of coming together as husband and wife. The notion of

pregnancy is a conscious effort to seal off leviration completely. The world may gossip, but for Uloko:

Let whatever will come, come. I am ready to face anything. I waited for three years for this day and I am ready to face anything. (Act 1 Scene 1).

Ogwoma's father Ibekwe has evaluated the young Uloko (by stipulating an amount of money he cannot pay) and found him wanting, incapable of assisting his family financially and, therefore, not worthy to marry his daughter. In spite of Uloko claim to love, Adigwu who could afford the bridal wealth has to be preferred. In this instance, Uloko is made a *persona non grata* and a daydreamer. Assigning the status of worthlessness to Uloko ignites the shadows in him. In his psychoanalytical enterprise, Carl Jung argues that our collective unconscious harbors many archetypes including *persona* which represents our public image and *shadow* which is the repository of sinister behaviours. He maintains that a threat to our public image sets in motion the manifestation of shadow or unhealthy aggression as a way of getting rid of psychic pain. In his essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man", Miller (1974:894) posits that the "tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing, his sense of personal dignity." He further maintains that, "tragedy results from man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly." Nothing can be as painful to Uloko as forcibly taking a young woman he has been nurturing and hoping to marry away from him. He feels psychic pain and this constrains him to put his life on the line in order to secure his sense of personal dignity.

If Uloko and Ogwoma violate the mourning period, it is because the tradition first stabbed them in the face and is still gearing up to treat their feeling once again with frightening indifference. They have to fight for their right for as Diokpa Okolie says in Act 2, Scene 1, "it is a slave who sees the truth and ties his tongue with silence".

In talking about the personality of Ogwoma, Udo reminds their kinsmen that:

All of us have known Ogwoma from the very day she was born. We know that she is very strong – willed. Many of us have often wondered why she did not become a man. (Act 2, Scene 1).

The implication is that Ogwoma has been prepared from the womb for the kind of task she undertakes in the play. The fight for freedom and human rights is usually for the strong-willed. Like Ogwoma, Uloko does show through his numerous speeches and acts that he is not somebody to be put in a pocket and walk away. He is willing to go to any length to have Ogwoma. Though their road to happiness is replete with twists and turns, both are willing as Arthur Miller would say to lay down their lives, "if need be", to secure their sense of personal dignity. For Miller (1974:895), the "thrust for freedom" is of essence to tragedy for the genre "points heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom". Uloko and Ogwoma are indeed revolutionary characters for together they challenge a seemingly stable culture that holds individual's sensibilities and rights tenaciously down. Though the struggle claims their lives, I believe that when the peace of their actions unsettle returns, it will take a fresh path other than the known way, because their death is a deep wound on social conscience. It points to the necessity of feelingfulness and the need to balance public morality with individual idiosyncrasy.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to create a fresh pathway in the interpretation of *Wedlock of the Gods*. It goes beyond the usual effort of reading the text ideologically or as a feminist template to interpret the play as an exercise in human rights abuse and the

daring involved in dealing with cultural myopism, which holds people's feelings down. The paper posits that the text is a synergistic effort by the sexes to challenge cultural practices that have been elevated to the point of immutability. Uloko and Ogwoma are a foil to cultural inflexibility. They demonstrate that individual's well-being is an integral part of a healthy social arrangement. Though the couple died in the end, Roberts (1971:132) believes that "theirs is a triumph of the human spirit who fights against odds for an idea it believes and sinks into glorious defeat with head still high and fist raised against the lowering heaven." This is hinted by Uloko's last statement in the play:

Your love will come with you.
Ours is the wedlock of the gods.
Together we shall forever be
lightning and thunder-inseparable!
Our love shall live forever;
Your light to keep it aglow.
My thunder to demolish all obstacles.
We shall leave this cursed place;
We shall ride on the cotton of the heaven;
We shall ride to where there is peace!
The sun shall dry our tears;
The stars shall crown our heads;
The night shall hide and protect us.
Over and around we shall together roam;
Beautifying as we impress! (Act 3, Scene 2).

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