

Review

The Notions of 'Victims' in Some Plays by the Nigerian Playwright Foluke Ogunleye

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The Nigerian playwright Foluke Ogunleye's professional career spans over three decades; she has been relevant in playwriting, directing, and the emerging aesthetics of the African video genre. This article examines Foluke Ogunleye's activity in the field of playwriting, it discusses what makes a person identifiable as a victim, and what attitude they adopt to end their ordeal. Leaning on Wollstonecraft's philosophy that women take charge emotionally and intellectually, if not economically, the paper examines women as victims of a patriarchal society that does not allow them any kind of independence. The paper uncovers the concern of the playwright for the children, particularly girls. Theatre for Development (TfD) can be helpful when discussing issues like abortion, HIV/AIDS, female genital mutilation in order to drive home the message. It is recommended that more scripted plays should evolve from Theatre for Development programmes that address sensitive, but essential information on knowledge concerning female anatomy and matters.

Keywords: Nigerian playwrights, feminism in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

In any society that allows segregation, there will always be the oppressor and the oppressed. Usually, the oppressed become the object of deprivation, subjugation and suppression. Given such a system, it is obvious that there will be clashes of interest between the two groups. When this occurs, like the proverbial clash of elephants, the grass will surely suffer. The weak therefore become the victims of the powers that be.

A victim is one who bears the brunt of an action, or the consequent result of someone else's misdeed or behavior. The paper therefore examines the notion of "victim" in some works of Foluke Ogunleye in order to identify this oppressed set, or subset, and discovers how the playwright portrays them in her works.

The work positions itself against Feminist assumptions

that society is patriarchal; these structures therefore create inequality between the sexes thus making women inferior to men. This inequality creates imbalance in the socio-economic sphere, thus making one gender dependent on the other to their detriment. This dependency creates room for the dependent gender to fall easy prey to the whims and caprices of the independent gender; the result of this reliance leaves a consequent sour note in the mouth of such oppressed members of society. The paper uses Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman* written in 1792 as a backdrop (Moore, 1999).

Indeed, Mary Wollstonecraft, born on April 27, 1759 in Spitalfields, London to Edward John Wollstonecraft, a gentleman farmer and Elizabeth Dixon lived one such life.

Her early life was tumultuous; she lived with an abusive father who regularly used his wife as a punching bag. As a result she left home at nineteen years to earn her own living as a lady's companion. She later worked as a school teacher and a private governess before gaining employment as a reviewer on the radical periodical *Analytical Review*, owned by the London printer Joseph Johnson (Moore 1).

However, her greatest legacy was her writing career in which she created a niche for women and her wish to see women acquire the status of rational, independent and useful citizens (Moore 40). She tried to incorporate in her lifetime, refusing to be legally married to Gilbert Imlay so that he would not feel compelled to help her out of her debt. A victim of her own philosophy, Wollstonecraft died shortly after childbirth because she believed that a midwife who is a woman, and not a man, should be involved in the process of child-delivery - a victim her own experiment!

Nigerian Women and Writing

The Nigerian woman has indeed come a long way. From the time of women's liberation, to the third feminist wave in the early seventies, living conditions of women have taken a turn for the best, even in Africa. However, one can still observe that they are discriminated against because they are not men; they are denied some rights as human beings; at times they are subject to sexist practices and stereotyping and they are harassed, exploited and abused sexually.

The twenty-first century has recorded great gains both in women writing and in attitude to women generally. This statement of fact is not limited to the western culture; even in Africa names like Zulu Sofola, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, Irene Isoken Agunloye-Salami, and Foluke Ogunleye attest to the fact that women have taken their places in the area of playwriting. It is also encouraging to note that yearly women gain admission into various institutions; little wonder then that at the level of professionalism now women are taking leadership roles whether as Chief Judges, Registrars, Vice Chancellors, Deputy Governors and the likes.

Women's work today need not be wrapped in masculine garb; female voices can, through their writings, impact others and actually add their quota to developmental growth in society. Indeed, education has made a lot of difference to women thereby making it possible for them to be in a position to contribute positively to societal development. This growth is reflected in the number of female writers that exists today. These women not only write professional works, but are actively involved in the process of creative writings. In the field of prose writing, names like Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Chimamanda Adichie, Zaynab Alkali, Seffi Attah

come to mind. The familiarity of these names indicates that women in Nigeria not only write literary pieces but their works can be found on the curriculum of several universities.

TfD , Development and Human Rights

Theatre for Development (TfD) is theatre used as a tool for development. It centers on creation of a dialogue drama which, whilst entertaining, is primarily analytical and it is a veritable instrument for instigating people-centred development (Abah, 1997::xii). Akorede sees development in the light of changes that take place within a system, community or nation (2008: 18). Development requires the satisfaction of both material and non-material basic needs; this involves the provision of education to enable genuine and meaningful participation (Aguda, 1989: 16) in self-realization as well as the emergence of an evolving society and nation. Thus theatre can be used as an effective tool to aid and fast-track this process. To do this effectively, TfD employs live performances - either with live actors or puppets - in order to present to the audience facts that they need to know in order that they are adequately enlightened.

Usually TfD is participatory theatre that encourages audience participation, leaving room for improvisation. In some cases it is the community that develops the script with all and sundry engaging in enacting this script; however, playwrights can also write scripts and this can be performed for an audience with the audience participating actively in the play-process. It would not be out of place to say that TfD is an effective tool for propaganda, therapy and for education. Thus TfD addresses the problems faced by a society and are performed to build awareness about critical topics which are mostly within a political or developmental context. (Wikipedia n pag) ; other topics include hygiene, women's rights, child abuse, prostitution and facts on HIV/AIDS.

Article 4 of The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, drafted in 1979, provides that human beings are inviolable and accordingly every human being is entitled to **his** life and **his** person. All forms of exploitation and degradation, particularly slavery, slave-trade, torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment and treatment are prohibited (Aguda 10). Going by this provisions, and the fact that the pronoun 'his' is used in this section, women seem to be left out of this provision. Article 15 states that every individual shall have the right to education. One should therefore not get unnecessarily touchy on the pronoun 'his' used above; it is necessary to observe that the period of this charter falls within the active period of the third wave of feminism, in the early seventies, thus one can thus pardon the use of "his" in Article 2.

TfD, by its unique nature, is an appropriate tool to use when female issues are discussed. Even in the dissemination of information on the rights of women and children, as well as information on relevant issues that are sensitive, particularly in a patriarchal society, the use of TfD seems an effective option. This usage of TfD by Foluke Ogunleye is explored in the following plays.

Nest in a Cage

As earlier mentioned, Ogunleye sees women as victims of a patriarchal society. In the Introduction of her play *Nest in a Cage* she notes thus about the play:

It debunks the myth among many modern young girls that material success Can only be attained through consorting with debauched rich old men. This myth has been fostered through patriarchal social structures, which has ensured that riches are mostly in the hands of men, and also, the patriarchal fallacy of the polygamous instinct, which allows men, no matter how old, to seek adulterous tryst with girls young enough to be their daughters (Ogunleye 2003, Introduction).

The playwright does not mince words about the type of society she is portraying; it is the world ruled by the whims and caprices of men. She apparently echoes Wollstonecraft's thoughts in *The Vindication for the Rights of Woman* that:

... for so many young women, finding a wealthy husband was the sole purpose of their existence; to this object their time is sacrificed, and their person often legally prostituted (Moore 2)

This is indeed the dream of Nike Adedara in this play. Because she comes from a poor background, she needs the rich Chief Agbabiaka to supply her daily up-keep so that she can buy the necessary books for her to progress in her medical degree programme in the university. In due course, she gets pregnant for Chief and this affects her studies. Chief does not want the pregnancy because he has only been toying with Nike. We learn from the doctor that he is living in a fool's paradise:

Doctor: That's what he usually promises to all his girlfriends. But you see, he is not really rich. The riches belong to his wife. She is the one that brought the business up. Her husband is actually her employee she married him as a poor penniless clerk. She knows about his small escapades, she even knows about this love nest. If he attempts to marry another wife or even have

a baby by another woman, that would be the end of his marriage. He will never allow' any woman to have his child except the woman happens to be richer than his wife. Actually, his wife is expecting their fourth child now. (36)

Little wonder he encourages her to abort the pregnancy. With friends like Dupe, and even the repentant Doctor, Nike leaves him because she is 'tired of this farce (38)' and is fully convinced that they cannot marry.

The bird imagery used in the play is worthy of note. Indeed a bird is either in a cage or in a nest. A bird's nest is natural to it, while a cage is artificial or man-made. To be caged is to be bereft of freedom, or denied ones right. For a nest to be inside a cage is a serious matter. That would mean that the bird was either deceived or lured into building its nest in a cage. Whichever way, the bird definitely is in trouble. Nike is that bird; a gullible village girl, she allows herself to be carried away by the charms of Chief Agbabiaka. She believes she is in a love-nest until Dupe confronts her thus:

Dupe: Nike are you sure it is a nest or a cage?

Nike: (pauses). Yes, I think it is a nest (becoming confused)... that is ...it was a nest, and then it became a cage. I think it is a nest in a cage... yes, a nest in a cage (25).

No doubt, Nike has fallen easy prey to the vulture, Agbabiaka. However, she has the strength and will to end her affair with him. She follows the lonely and difficult path of early single parenthood without the support of her parents and proves her scholarship in Medicine. Little wonder then that she ends up the better for her experience and can be a source of inspiration to young girls who would probably fall into the same predicament.

Linking the case of Busola Yusuf of the Paragon Girl's College to Nike's story, one observes that Busola Yusuf is a student of this College, and from all indication, can be said to be 'morally bankrupt (2)'. A product of 'a broken home (1)', Busola seems to be a social deviant, rebelling against constituted authority. One can see her as a microcosm of the community audience the playwright targets. She herself is a victim of circumstances as can be deduced from the following dialogue between the Principal and Teacher:

Teacher: She seems to be so angry at the whole world and so determined to hurt everyone in sight.

Principal: It is a great pity. She has so much potential, but she is suffering from a sense of defeat.

Teacher: Her father has convinced her that because her mother ran away with another man while she was still a baby, nobody could possibly

love her and that she cannot make any headway in life. (1 - 2)

This then is the crux of the play; a message to girls who lack self-worth because the society sees them as frivolous and irresponsible. Busola's father - a representative of authority in the societal strata - believes Busola would grow up to behave like her mother and has thus programmed her not to progress in life; ironically, it is to boys that Busola runs for solace. In order to do this, she breaks bounds to attend night-parties in spite of the school's regulations against such acts.

Adagunodo's (which ironically means 'a still river') speech in the Epilogue is characteristically in the vein of Tfd. The playwright makes the weight of the message rest solely on her shoulders. She notes that her life has not been a bed of roses and observes 'I have been luckier than most girls who went astray'; importantly, she declares:

...Is there anyone here who has made a mistake? You feel you have messed up your life real bad? It is not too late. Arise with determination that your tomorrow will be better. Refuse to be defeated. Refuse to bow. Never have you ensnared yourself in a cage as you seek for a nest (51)...

Thus, as a victim, one must not give up; rather one must pick up the threads of one's life and move on to greater heights; this is the message of the play.

The Innocent Victim

This play is centre on the issue of female genital cutting in the Yoruba-speaking parts of Nigeria. The play examines the disadvantages of what is commonly known as female circumcision, particular its negative effect on both the female anatomy and physiology. The title of the play prepares our minds as to what to expect in the play. Little Kofo is the innocent victim who has to die as a result of tradition. However, on a deeper level, her mother, Tutu is a victim of the consequences of genital mutilation. As a result of this mutilation she becomes frigid, and is later discovered to have been infected in the process. Kola describes this ordeal well when he explains thus:

KOLA: In the first place, my wife could not have sexual relations with me for a long time, thanks to the scalpel of the circumciser. When she eventually got pregnant, she lost the pregnancy due to infections she contacted during the process of circumcision. You also know as well as I do that she had a terrible

time delivering our daughter due to the scars sustained from the obnoxious circumcision (22).

Indeed, one sympathizes (empathizes?) with Tutu's ordeal.

Ironically, and sadly too, in this play, the women are their own enemies. Alhaja believes in female circumcision and goes to all length to make sure her granddaughter Kofo goes through this gruesome operation, which gives the innocent child the dreaded HIV/AIDS virus and finally takes her innocent life. Too late, in answer to Mama Tutu's accusation, Alhaja realizes her folly and declares:

I deserve it. Let her talk. What I have done is unpardonable. I thought I was the only wise person in the world and I insisted on having my own way. I am very sorry. From now onward, I say NO to female circumcision. As a matter of fact, Matron says it is not female circumcision it is female cutting. I know that cannot bring Kofo back, but I am going to do my level best to make sure the practice is eradicated in this city (32 - 33).

From Alhaja's attitude in the play, we see women as victims in the hands of their own gender. The issue of the meddling mother-in-law is not novel to the Nigerian nuclear family setup. Most in-laws, particularly the female ones, are the bane of many homes. They see the new wife as a rival, or stranger in her own home, and make life unbearable for her; Alhaja is a typical example of such mother-in-law as suggested in the following extract:

Alhaja: Yes. Now that she has gone, let us get down to serious talking.

Kola: What is it about?

Alhaja: You did not say anything when I mentioned the issue of circumcision.

Kola: Tutu has told you our decision about the matter; we will not circumcise our daughter.

Alhaja: What do you mean? You want to tell me that a mere woman dictates for you how to run your life? (Holds up her hands) My God, let it not be said that I raised a fool. (21)

But for the fact that Kola stands his grounds, Alhaja's careless words could have caused a rift in the family of Kola and Tutu. Note the fact that Alhaja calls Tutu 'a mere woman'; this statement echo patriarchal sentiments voiced by the likes of Sigmund Freud and other anti feminist supporters and is not uttered in the spirit of sister-hood. Her inability to empathise or sympathise with Tutu is a product of the cultural heritage passed down to her from her forebears.

First is her belief in traditional metaphysical powers;

she believes in the Babalawo who claims that Tutu's miscarriage is as a result of spiritual interference as observed in the following dialogue:

Babalawo: You don't know anything. Witches are all over the place and they spare nobody, not even their children.

Alhaja: What are we going to do then? I don't want my son to be a victim.

Babalawo: Don't worry, we shall see to it (19).

This same Babalawo encourages her to kidnap her own granddaughter in order to proceed with the circumcision rites and thus uses unsterilized instruments to perform the cutting; this has dire consequences on the baby's health and well-being. Also, she (like Mama Tutu) has been made to believe that female circumcision 'prevent the woman from being promiscuous (15, 21)'; hence her desperation to keep the family tradition.

Like *Nest in a Cage*, Ogunleye uses the TfD approach to address the sensitive issue of female genital mutilation; using a seemingly conventional theatre approach, she broaches on the age long issue of female circumcision that is gradually becoming out-dated in the most parts of Nigeria. Also, in this play, Ogunleye's association with media-practice, comes to fore, particularly, in her arrangement of scenes. Here also the community setting adds to the instrumentality of TfD. The female victims of genital cutting are the major targets here; it is relevant to note that the play was written by the encouragement of the Campaign Against Unwanted Pregnancy - a non-Governmental Organisation. Of a truth, one agrees with Ogunleye that 'drama, theatre and the media are not meant for the titillation of the senses. They have proved, time and again, to be useful in influencing human life behaviour (Preface xiii)' and this is certainly the aim of TfD. At the end of the play, the female victims (the audience) can, like Alhaja, feel that in spite of their losses, they can be vanguards in saying an affirmative 'no' to practices that do not auger for their well being; they can therefore become in the words of Elder and Alhaja:

Elder: When she delivers we will all become policemen and women.

We must all make sure that this kind of tragedy never befalls this family again.

Alhaja: Not this family alone. It must not occur in our land again (33).

This ending is worthy to be classified as being a propaganda against ills levied against women in the society; thus as victims, they need not stay in the valley grieving over losses, but should be in the vanguard to prevent further losses and damage to the girl-child in particular and all women in general.

Jabulile

In the Preface to the play, the writer says 'It is hatred, not 'love' that fuels the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It is hatred that leads to rape; it is hatred, not 'love' that leads to extra-marital and premarital sex. (vii)' The play is indeed one that relates the consequences of hatred, especially when the victim of this hatred does not in any way deserve this hatred. Jabulile is the niece of Dudu; she becomes an orphan as a result of an automobile accident in which she loses both her parents. Due to her Dudu's greed, Jabulile has to stay with her after the accident. Like the wicked step-mother in the Cinderella story, Dudu turns the life of Jabulile - whose name ironically means Joy - to misery. Indeed, Jabulile's education would have been sacrificed but for the fact that she is brilliant and that Dudu's husband, Vusie, secures a scholarship for her. Dudu's hatred for Jabulile rubs off on her daughter Phindile; and it is this hatred that culminates into the organised gang-rape that infects Jabulile with the dreaded HIV/AIDS disease. Indeed she confesses:

I really hated her. I thought, how could she be going around as a virgin, while I was as good as a public utility vehicle? How could she be so intelligent and beloved by everybody in the village and I so utterly despised? So, to destroy her glory, I arranged with Manqoba to have one of his friends rape Jabulile. I never knew it would be a gang-rape, because Manqoba also participated. If I had known, I wouldn't have cared anyway. One of them infected Jabulile with HIV, and I was affected too. That is why Jabulile died and that is why I am going to die also (61).

This confession, however, is belated because it cannot bring Jabulile back to life. However one has hopes that her good deeds will forever live after her, particularly if girls like Zandile, who was once branded 'a first class bitch (44)', can be reformed and can promise over the corpse of Jabulile that:

The only reward that we can give to you is to live a life that is worthy of your memory and we pledge to do that with all that you have deposited in us(65).

In the eventuality that this happens, then Jabulile's life will not have been in vain.

The victims targeted in this play are teenagers, who, though morally upright, are innocently infected with the dreaded HIV/AIDS disease like Jabulile; beyond this however, Ogunleye's HIV/AIDS disease could be a symbol for other negative societal viruses. Whatever it stands for however, though Jabulile dies, her works lives on after her. Indeed, her morality not only influenced her

peers, but is a source of emulation by all and sundry as can be observed in the play. Ogunleye, the playwright, craftily moulds her story not only to evoke pity, but also to draw out admiration for one so bright and talented. The tragedy is that such a life is snuffed out at such a tender age. She seems to use Jabulile's life to admonish us not to give up, no matter the odds. It is worthy of note that even when Jabulile is aware of her HIV status, she does not give up on life; she continues with her academics to the very end. In this wise, the message of the play does not deny the absence of victims; it however encourages victims to move from vanquished to conquerors, from sinned against to saints.

Conclusion: Victims in Ogunleye's work

The three plays by Foluke Ogunleye, addressed in this paper, centre around female characters who have become violated - or abused - at one point or the other in their lives; this violation could be physical, spiritual, verbal or sexual. No doubt all the female characters - Nike, Kofo, Tutu, and Jabulile - are violated one way or the other: Kofo and Tutu by the scapel of the circumciser; Jabulile by her jealous aunt's beatings and the sexual infringement afflicted on her by Manqoba and his friends. Nike's violation is also sexual as Chief's Agbabiaka uses her as a sex slave to satisfy his sexual desires.

It is interesting to note however that these victims are the creation of their own gender. It is true that the Nigerian society is patriarchal, but the playwright seems to place blame squarely on the shoulders of the matriarchs themselves. Nike's enemies are actually her room-mate - Deola and Lanre - both ladies, who introduce her to the loose life that will eventually get her into trouble; Kofo and her mother Tutu are victims of Alhaja, Kofo's paternal grandmother, who must defend the age-long traditions of her forebears, and Jubulile the victim of sibling rivalry and jealousy between her late mother and her living aunt. One observes that it is only Nike that is not a victim of forces within her own nuclear family; but even at that, Nike's family turn their backs on her when she needs them most.

Ogunleye's victims therefore are sufferers at the mercy of the very people who are supposed to be their helpers. Napikoski's sisterhood - used among feminists to express the connection of women who are not biologically related but are bonded in solidarity (n pag) - then comes into question. The women in the play - particularly those who inflict sufferings on the victims - are not bonded in solidarity; the worst case being that of Jabulile. Her cousin Phindile causes her pain as a result of her hatred and jealousy. In a similar vein, Alhaja only becomes committed to Tutu only after Kofo's death. Probably, the best example of sisterhood in the works examined would be Dupe in *Nest in a Cage*, who stands by Nike through

thick and thin despite the fact that they are not biologically related.

Ogunleye's notion of victims therefore should be understood in the light of feminism to send a message of reprimand to women who have long claimed that men have been their bane in society. Going by the three plays, men are not the issue; Kola is a considerate husband in *The Innocent Victim*; Vusie and Thulani are committed to Jabulile even till death in the play *Jabulile*; and Tayo marries Nike and gives her a reason to live in *Nest in a Cage*. No doubt, these men, crucial to the play, are gentlemen who would fit into Wollstonecraft's description of men who women should marry.

The playwright is skilful in the art of play-writing, using conventions to give her work credence. For instance she uses the flash-back technique in *Nest in a Cage* to make her story to young girls more convincing as she uses the life of Dr. (Mrs) Nike Adagunodo (nee Adedara) to warn on 'living a morally loose life' and to 'examine the evils of abortion'. In *Jabulile*, however, her scenes are not used conventionally for each scene represents movements from one location to another - more like in films - which is not usual in drama.

As earlier discussed, TfD employs live performances in order to present to the audience facts that they need to know in order that they are adequately enlightened. Since this type of theatre largely employs improvisation, there would not be the space or time for set changes; hence the appropriateness of the scene convention in *The Innocent Victim*. In a similar vein, the flashback technique is appropriate to *Nest in a Cage*. Thus the girls being addressed could be the audience of young girls who the playwright wrote the script for.

In concluding this paper, one must mention the playwright's concern for the girl-child. All three plays studied see her (the girl-child) as a victim in the hands of various agents in society. Indeed, her three plays target the girl-child, taking her characters from early childhood to the initial stages of adult-hood, with a concentration on girls that have been sexually violated or mutilated. Thus the story of Kofo - not even a toddler - in *The Innocent Victim* and teenagers like Jabulile and Nike Adedara in *Jabulile* and *Nest in a Cage* respectively, are targeted with the intention of educating young girls on sex-related activities, which is one of the aims of TfD.

The sufferers in Ogunleye's plays become victims not because they are guilty; they are innocent. However, either as a result of cultural practices, evil counselling or bad blood, they suffer the consequences of the actions of others. In two of the three cases studied, death is the end product of the suffering; Kofo and Jabulile die as a result of the HIV/AIDS virus which they contracted through the carelessness and promiscuousness of others. Only Nike seems to be the only character not totally scalded by the follies of others; maybe because her pregnancy is really as a result of her own making. In her own case, the

playwright seems to attack the issue of unwanted pregnancy and the fact that such pregnancies should not mean the physical, economical or educational death of any girl-child.

Whatever the connotation one may ascribe to Foluke Ogunleye's notion of victim, she is definitely concerned about the girl-child; her plays has an uncanny empathy with the category of young girls who are sexually naive and, at times, get themselves into trouble because they are innocent victims of society. The girl-child can be helped to discover herself and achieve the standards set by the likes of Wollstonecraft craft.

Finally, in uncovering Ogunleye's notion of victims, one observes that she does not see victims as sufferers who should allow their situation to get the better of them; for her, one makes mistakes in life knowingly (intentionally) or unknowingly (innocently); either way, there is always the option of retracing ones path . Like the Yoruba proverb quoted in *The Innocent Victim* 'It is the water that is spilt, the calabash is still intact (33) - *omi lo d'anu, agbe o fo* -.

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