

The Position of Women in Greek and African Culture: A Study of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and Rotimi's *our Husband has Gone Mad Again*

¹Cecilia Addei and ²Cynthia Elisabeth Osei

¹Centre for Communication and Entrepreneurship Skills (CENCES), University of Mines and Technology (UMaT), Ghana

²Kumasi Polytechnic, Ghana

Abstract: The position and image of women in literary studies have most of the time reflected position and role in the society. In most traditions, women do not play any important role because they are considered as lacking the capability of reasoning and decision making. While most women have accepted this traditional role, there are some who reject the dictates of the society and emancipate themselves from the oppression of the society. This study looks at the position of the woman according to the tenets of culture and further establishes the fact that the woman's position is universal. This has been done through two comic plays; Aristophanes *Lysistrata* and Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. These two plays have been discussed to establish to what extent the woman has accepted or rejected the traditional role dictated to her by the society.

Key words: African, culture, community, marriage, woman

INTRODUCTION

Women worldwide have been looked down upon by their male counterparts. Men have always enjoyed the privilege of superiority over women. According to De Beauvoir (1949), "very often this privilege depends upon inequality of numbers- the majority imposes its rule upon the minority or persecutes it. But women are not a minority, like the American Negroes or the Jews; there are as many women as men on earth." One just wonders about the basis of this sex stereotype where women are seen as inferior.

In Ancient Greek culture, the man was the head of the family; indeed he was the master over his wife. In this culture, women, slaves and children were considered as one group, which group was not allowed to vote, so it was in the olden days. In the daily lives of the Ancient Greeks, the man's bath was structured differently from that of the woman. The main difference was that the woman's bath did not have a tepidarium (cold room) or a paluistra (exercise area). The baths also differed in the fact that the rooms in the women's bath were smaller than those in the men's.

Further among the Ancient Greeks, the patrician's aristocracy had elaborate dinners, with parties and wines and a variety of comestibles. Dancing girls were present at these dinners only in so far as they entertained the diners. Their women, during these times, ate separately; but in their later Empire period, with permissiveness creeping in, decent women were allowed to attend such dinner parties.

Likewise in Africa, the female sex has been stereotyped to such an extent that women have been given certain roles to play in the society, which most men will not associate themselves with. For instance, women are supposed to cook in the homes, care for their babies and wash the clothes of their families. Because of this, some women are asked by their husbands to be housewives with active support from their families. To this end, such women are not allowed to engage in any meaningful income generating ventures so that they can have time for their household chores.

All these have come about not because nature made it so but as a result of certain social practices in Africa. According to Umorem (1995), "the African child is born female or male. The girl child grows up as an African girl and later becomes a woman through the process of enculturation. This enculturation process has both cognitive and emotional elements. The girl child who later becomes a woman learns and internalises both. This learning-to-become is comprehensive in the sense that one learns and internalises the derogatory and positive concepts, judgments and attitudes towards womanhood. This learning takes place through examples, direct teaching and in patterns of behaviour, in songs, proverbs, wise sayings and folktales." This shows that it is the culture of the African that dictates the position of women in the society. According to Oha (1998), proverbs, as forms of figurative communication with didactic functions in studied conversations were found to possess evidence of male attempt at maintaining control over discourse in society." This explains why the representations of

womanhood in most African proverbs are mainly negative. Addei and Addei (2010) state that, "Apart from the proverbs that support female subordination; there are others which celebrate women. For instance, there are a lot of proverbs that portray the woman as industrious, compassionate and a key player in the society." However, such proverbs are hardly heard and men capitalise on the negative ones to suppress women.

Generally the African community is predominantly a male dominated one. It is a community in which men view women as extension of themselves. The man is always superior to the woman. Yes, even the male baby is superior to his female counterpart. Certain household chores are reserved for the girl child whereas the growing male child takes up 'manly' duties at home like fixing dead electric bulbs. In adult life, domestic work is regarded as the responsibility of the woman. In a typical African set up the man has made the woman the insignificant other.

This study seeks prove that in spite of all these forms of discrimination, there are women who have stood up to challenge the status quo and have rejected the traditional role dictated to them by the society.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN LYSISTRATA

In his bid to bring out the woman's role and position, Aristophanes discusses the themes of marriage, western marriage for that matter and women's emancipation. The subject matter of the play establishes the position of the Greek woman. It is war time; war is a serious matter and therefore a preserve for men. The woman, who is "naught but love affairs and bassinets", stays behind at home taking care of her God-given responsibilities like:

Working on her husband, another is
Getting up the maid, another has to put
The baby to bed, or wash and feed it (lines 25-28)

Since time immemorial and as far back as the biblical times, the woman has been adjudged the "weaker sex" and it has been seriously doubted whether the woman had any brains at all. This is echoed in Calonice's words: "But what could women do that's clever or distinguished?" Line 25

The woman has no place when it comes to distinguished and lofty issues like war, politics and governance among others. The woman, as it were, cannot be on her own without heavy reliance and dependence on the man. So when it is time for war one cannot expect to hear anything favourable so far as the position or role of the woman is concerned. In the Magistrate's words, as regards women and war: "What business has women with war and peace?" (Lines 90-91). Again the dictates of Greek tradition are that: "War shall be the concern of men." (Lines 31-32)

As is typical of Aristophanes' comedy, Lysistrata reveals a reversal of the status quo. Her role can be

likened to Yaa Asantewaa, in Ghanaian and Ashanti history, who dared where men feared to tread. War is the concern of men, but in this play, we see women taking over the role of men. During war time, the woman and the child have nothing to do but to stay at home and wait. The women by their actions show that they have visions and concepts that surpass the fictitious politics and warfare of men. Thus echoing the popular saying:

"Anything boys can do girls can do better"

The play starts at a time when the Peloponnesian war is already twenty years old. The women led by Lysistrata have waited for more than enough time. In the Prologue Lysistrata shows how fed up she is having to wait as if the woman has nothing to offer, no helping hand to stretch forth to her male counter part.

Lys: Ah, Calonice, my heart aches
I'm so annoyed at us women
For among men we have a reputation for sly trickery
(lines 19-21)

Lysistrata's position as leader of the women for their freedom can be likened to Deborah in the Bible, the prophetess in Israel who directed and led the men during her turn as a judge in Israel.

Barak said to her, "if you go with me,
I will go; but if you don't go with me,
I won't go". "Very well" Deborah said
"I will go with you. But because of the way you are
going about this, the honour will not be yours, for the
Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman" So Deborah
went with Barak to Kedish. (Judges 4: 8-9).

According to their culture and tradition war is sacred, a pearl, a "taboo", a preserve for men and not for women. The entire war is to the detriment of the woman. That is the more reason why Lysistrata decides to mobilize the other women to execute her plan which she is cocksure will not fail. She wants to lead the womenfolk to put an end to the war, in their own way.

Arkins (1994), in his essay 'Sexuality in Fifth-Century Athens', quotes a remark he sees to be paradoxical by Helene Foley concerning Athenian women:

'Although women in fact play virtually no public
Role other than a religious one in the political
And social life of the ancient Greeks, they dominate
the Imaginative life of Greek men to a degree almost
Unparalleled in the Western tradition...

This justifies the role played by Lysistrata and her womenfolk to liberate the entire womenfolk. They start their role at a pace so slow even for they themselves but

soon move up the ladder till they get to the point of absolute success. Their only means to achieve success is their God-given weapon-SEX. The women become eventually convinced that sex is the only tool available to them to have their way in anything even if it is putting an end to a war of this nature. With their newly found freedom their plan is to force their husbands and lovers to negotiate peace. At first most of them are unwilling to think that their husbands and lovers have been away for so long and when they come back, there will be no sexual pleasure of any form. The women are reluctant at first because to them sex is an experience and 'there is nothing like it.' But when the women eventually become convinced, they stick to their goal. So convinced are they to stick to their goal that even when Myrrhine's husband comes back to her, even to the extent of bringing their son along with him, she refuses to go home with him; knowing fully well that her presence at home is not to take care of her son but rather to meet the sexual demand of her husband, Kinesias.

According to existing culture war is a proof of manhood. However, the women by their action want to prove to the community (society) that the tables can turn and have really turned; power to end the war which is the prerogative of men has now moved to the women. One can conclude that like Yaa Asantewaa and Prophetess Deborah, Lysistrata's role in the play portrays the theme of women's emancipation.

Another theme portrayed in the play is marriage. The play discusses marriages where the man marries only one wife. As a result of this arrangement his wife is his only source of sex. No wonder the women use this as their tool to force the men to stop the war. The action of the play is dramatized to show that the men have all the time at their disposal to get married. The women on the other hand are limited by natural constraints and do not have all the time at their disposal. For as long as the war rages on, the women will have to sit and wait for the return of the men to come and marry them. The sad reality is that the man, when he comes back, no matter how grey-haired he is, can conveniently find himself a wife but it is not the same for the woman whose "biological clock" ticks, as it were, to a time when it may be too late for her to make children. When Lysistrata discusses this with the magistrate, he is of the view that it is the same for the man and woman to stay and wait for the war to end before marrying.

Lys:I grieve most for the maids
Who grow old at home unwed
Mag:Don't men grow old, too?
Lys:For heaven's sake! That's not the same
Thing. When a man comes home, no matter
How grey he is, he soon finds a girl to marry.
But a woman's bloom is short and fleeting; if
She doesn't grasp her chance, no man is willing
to marry her and she sits at home a prey to
every fortune teller

Thus nature itself has positioned the woman this way; that her chances and privileges are not the same as those of the men. Thus a woman's season is brief, it slips and she will have no husband as she can do nothing but grow old whilst waiting. So when the women decide to make war the concern of women, it is unbelievable and a shock to the society.

From the discussion above it is clear that nature itself has disadvantaged the woman. Again the role and position of the woman in western marriage is quite secondary. The women's roles in marriage are:

Working on her husband, another is
Getting up the maid, another has to put
The baby to bed, or wash and feed it. (Lines 25-28)

The conclusion to be drawn from the review of *Lysistrata* is that women by their marriages have secondary positions and roles; however the theme of women's emancipation also shows that the women do not accept their role and position but crave for a reversal of this status quo.

THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN OUR HUSBAND HAS GONE MAD AGAIN

The entire play can be summed up in the description given by Hawley (1996) in *Writing the Nation: Self and Country in the Post-Colonial Imagination*.

The African woman struggling to assert herself against historically determined insignificance, a self (that is) constituted through the suffering of nearly every form of oppression, a self that must find its voice in order to speak not only for itself but for others similarly oppressed (p.127).

The play opens when polygamist Lejoka-Brown is deep into politics. He has had enough military experience and maybe enough 'marriage politics' and is now deep into "real" politics. His party's slogan forms the opening words of the play. As a typical comedy Rotimi (1997) employs the technique of the chorus:

Chorus: freedom, freedom
Everywhere there must be freedom

Solo: Freedom for you
Freedom for me
Chorus: Everywhere there must be freedom
Solo: Freedom for Nigeria
Freedom for Africa
Chorus: Yes, everywhere there must be freedom.
All: Freedom, freedom
Everywhere there must be freedom

Against this cultural backdrop the man is already free; it is the woman who must be given freedom. Ironically, those who sing this song do not have the

womenfolk in mind. The women are not considered here because for a fact the woman is and remains like a minor who must be protected and provided for by males. So there is a little distinction between the woman and the child. After all, are they not grouped together? In the community there are basically two groups of people namely: men in one group, the second group being women and children. Again in this play, Rotimi brings to light various themes including marriage, both western and traditional, polygamy and women's emancipation. Western marriage is dramatized in the marriage between Lejoka-Brown and Lisa. Their marriage is an ordinance marriage where the wife is not only the first wife but also the only wife. He meets her in Stanley Ville during the Congo war. She is at that time a medical student from Kenya, helping the Red Cross. She attends to Lejoka-Brown when he is wounded. After a period of about two months they have a court wedding at the marriage registry. No wonder Lisa fails to see Mama Rashida and Sikira as co-wives and sees Sikira as a maid. Sikira cannot be bothered by the so called western marriage and explodes:

Sikira: ehen? Therefore!
If you marry in magistrate court nko?
I don't care
If you marry in American Toronto!
I don't care
Whether you wear all the rings in this world,
I don't care
Whether you know book 'tele' you tire o,
I don't care

It is against this background that when Lejoka-Brown gets Lisa's cablegram, he is momentarily thrown into a state of confusion. In Lejoka-Brown's own words, Liza's coming:

It is war...Gamalin 20 (p7)
Simply because she's [Liza] arriving at five o'clock!
...from America!

It is as if he has so much to hide from Liza. So there is no way Liza must come and live with him in his family house. Lisa must not learn about his other wives therefore he must necessarily arrange to accommodate her somewhere else; this he discusses with Okonkwo, his friend.

Okonkwo: Man, you'd better hurry up, if you have to get
A flat rented, pack your things into it and
Be at the airport before five o'clock!
Lejoka-Brown: That's no problem. We'll stop at Maryland

Estate on our way to the airport and get
A furnished flat. As for parking in, I'll start
Doing that tomorrow.

Traditional marriage is also illustrated in Lejoka-Brown's marriage to Mama Rashida and Sikira. It is a polygamous marriage. Mr. Lejoka-Brown in fact has three wives, an arrangement with which he is very comfortable and proud of. This is because it is an accepted norm in the society; after all his grandfather had 'one hundred plus ten plus five breathing wives all at once under his very roof. According to the African society in general and the Yoruba society in particular, a married woman is the property of her husband. If a woman gets married, she loses all personal rights and self-identity. In this type of marriage the wife is constantly at the beck and call of her husband. Their responses below show just that.

Sikira and Mama Rashida: We will my Lord.
Sikira: Coming my Lord
Mama Rashida: Did my Lord call?
Sikira: Has my Lord finished eating?

Again the tradition upon which some marriages are based can be difficult to understand; take for instance the one between Lejoka-Brown and Mama Rashida. Lejoka-Brown has not thought of or set eyes on Mama Rashida but in accordance with their tradition and culture she must quietly and obediently agree to marry the younger brother of her late husband. This is expressed in Lejoka-Brown's own words.

Lejoka-Brown: I didn't know I had another wife.
... two days before my marriage to Liza,
I got a letter from my father ... he had
gone ahead and married her (Mama Rashida)
off to me, while I ... was in the
Congo ... (page 9)

Again in this type of marriage a woman is there for a man's taking; a married woman loses all personal rights and self identity. She must quietly take things as they come from her husband without showing any resistance whatsoever. So when Okonkwo questions Lejoka-Brown as to why he does not inform a senior wife before taking on a new one he reacts thus:

Lejoka-Brown: What type of question are you asking anyhow? "Why didn't I tell Liza; why didn't I tell"-what's the matter? Does a man have to broadcast to one wife every time he marries a new one?

So it is obvious how the man is not required by tradition to give any explanations for his actions and inactions.

Tradition and culture also make it possible for a man to marry as many as one hundred plus ten plus five

breathing wives all at once to live together as co-wives or 'sisters-in-marriage' cordially under one roof. Mama Rashida and Sikira know and have accepted this as part of their cultural upbringing and are therefore able to get along with each other. Liza on the other hand cannot accept this principle. It is that the play depicts the traditional subordinate roles of women; seen in Mama Rashida and to some extent, Sikira.

The theme of women's emancipation is also very evident in the play. An illustration of this theme is seen in Lisa's role. She is a medical officer and a wife who believes that men and women are created equal and as such should enjoy equal rights. Indeed Liza represents the new and modern values and institutions that give rise to the emancipation of the woman. Her only basis or justification for this stand is her education; formal education leading to her being a medical officer and from her acquaintance, contacts and exposure to the western world. She feels she has successfully emancipated herself and sets out to help her 'sisters-in-marriage (co-wives) to realize their potential and not be slaves to their husband's whims and caprices. This role she successfully plays because after giving Mama Rashida tit bits on demand and supply and others on how to improve her trade, Mama Rashida's trade booms to the extent that she now makes sufficient profit and is even able to lend her husband money for his politics. Sikira is enthused about this new idea about women emancipation particularly the fact that men and women are both created equal. At a point in time she wishes she had a heart strong enough to tell her husband to go to hell. She tells Lisa.

Sikira: You are a strong woman, with a strong, strong heart.
Sometimes I wish I too, had your kind of strong, strong heart
So I could tell our husband to go to hell!

Through Lisa's efforts Sikira also becomes convinced that men and women are equal since they are created equal. Sikira finds so much joy in her mental liberation. If a woman is equal to a man then women can also form and lead a party.

'suppose we form a party, she asks Liza
... every home there must be freedom.
... freedom for mothers
Freedom for housemaids
Yes in every home there must be freedom.

Her liberation is mental because physically and socially her environs are the same. She eventually becomes president of her husband's party thereby displacing her own husband.

Women's emancipation is further illustrated in Madam Bambira Ajanaku's position and role. She is the

mother of Sikira and more importantly head of the National Union of Nigerian Market Women. She teams up with her daughter Sikira in their political party and eventually pushes Sikira up to the top to become the president of the party.

It is the spirit of emancipation that makes Sikira come out with the following outburst when Lejoka-Brown orders her Sikira to "go and take the rag off", referring to a dress he disapproves of; she is to hurry up 'and put on the type of dress human beings wear'. At this retortion, Sikira, who thinks that she has to assert her position as a wife and a woman, who is created equal to man boldly speaks back to Lejoka-Brown initially in his own words.

Sikira: do as you say, do as you say! It is always do as you say. Always command, command, command! Why don't you show some respect and let me do as I want , just once!

Sikira:... what am I in this house, anyway?
...am I a slave?
... or a housewife?
... I will get out of here
Men and women are created equal! (page 57)

Lejoka-Brown is stunned by the boldness of Sikira, who has suddenly become assertive, moving from the traditional passive woman to the modern active woman. She has moved from her traditional position where, as the property of her husband, she is expected to respect and obey to a position of challenging the traditionally established, inherited order.

CONCLUSION

From the fore-going it can be concluded that the position of the woman as dictated by her tradition and culture is virtually the same world-wide. This means, first of all, that there are some basic similarities among the traditions and cultures of various ethnic groups especially between Ancient Greek and African culture. For both Greek and African culture the woman is brought up to accept self-erasure and subordination.

Generations of women world-wide, particularly Greek and African women inherit cultural practices that inhibit the emancipation of women and delay their empowerment. While some women have accepted this culture-given role there are others who have rejected it and liberated themselves.

The role of the woman, with particular reference to Greek and African may be summed up in Chukwuma (1994) words: "If a woman keeps her place without asking questions then she is being cultural and unwestern. If she asserts herself, that is if she is feminist, then she is a deviant, unAfrican and multicultural. This then is the bane of feminism in Africa everywhere (127 p.).

Lysistrata and Liza do not represent only the Greek and African woman respectively but also the concept of the woman in the entire universe.”

REFERENCES

- Addei, C. and I. Addei, 2010. Celebration of African women in proverbs, wise sayings and folktales: An example of Akan tradition in Ghana. *J. Commun. Culture Int. Perspec.* 1(3): 5.
- Arkins, B., 1994. Sexuality in Fifth Century Athens, University College Galway. Retrieved from: <http://www.niu.edu/~jdye/AthenianSex.html>, (Accessed on: January 06, 2012).
- Chukwuma, H., 1994. *Feminism in African Literature: Essays on Criticism*. New Generation Books, Enugu, pp: 127.
- De Beauvoir, S., 1949. *The Nature of the Second Sex*, France. Lebrairie, Gallimard, pp: 14.
- Hawley, J.C., 1996. *Writing the Nation: Self and Country in the Post-Colonial Imagination*. Editions Rodopi B.V. New York, pp: 127.
- Oha, O., 1998. The semantics of female devaluation in igbo proverbs. *Afri. Stud. Monogr.* 19(2): 87-102.
- Rotimi, O., 1997. *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. University Press PLC, Nigeria, pp: 86.
- Umorem, U.E., 1995. Enculturation and enculturation: The gospel of liberation and the culture of African womanhood. *C.U.E.A.*, 11(3): 6.