

## GENDER DYNAMICS AND FEMALE ACTIVISM IN OLA ROTIMI'S *OUR HUSBAND HAS GONE MAD AGAIN*

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### Abstract

*This paper interrogates gender dynamics and female activism in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. The paper is a literary research and so, relies on close reading of the primary text, using Clenora Hudson-Weems' *Africana Womanism* as its theoretical position. Findings in this paper reveal that, unlike in some male-authored literary works, where women are relegated to the fringes of the society's schema on the premise of gender roles, Ola Rotimi reconstructs gender, womanhood and portrays women as activists, assertive and active participants in the socio-political calculus of their societies. The paper concludes that the author's portraiture of women reflects the envisioned collapse of patriarchal structures, as well as, prominence of female individuality in contemporary African societies.*

**Keywords: Gender, Activism, Africana Womanism, Female individuality.**

### Introduction:

Gender has often been seen as a social construct in which conventional social roles are assigned to men and women because of differences in their biological sexes. It is widely defined as a sort of social configuration, in which men and women are given certain roles according to a specific culturally defined social, economic, and political system. In almost all cases, these roles reflect the value system of a society, which entails a set of prescribed behaviour and actions for both men and women in such society. The set cultural roles define the basis of social, economic and political engagements among the sexes. Therefore, gender as a social construct has been the guise under which the female gender in the patriarchal African society is subjected to some forms of abuse of rights; denial of certain economic and political rights and privileges on the basis of their biological sex.

Sherif (1982:376) asserts that "gender is a scheme for social categorization of individuals, and every known human society has some gender scheme. Every gender scheme recognizes biological differentiation while also creating social differentiations". It, thus, suffices that gender is a social construct or a social system of a biased stratification of human beings in a given human association or community based on their biological sex differentiations. These differences, it is important to note, form the basis for socio-political and economic differentiation of males and females, while putting the males in an advantage over the females in nearly all fields of human endeavours. Akpan and Udoette (2023:72) aver that: "Despite the fact that gender roles have considerably shifted, resulting in some positive effects, some men still tenaciously hold on to the prescribed gender-type roles and behaviour and this has historically provided the unfortunate premises for denigration, suppression and exploitation of women". This has been the genesis of gender stereotypes in most African societies and, it

is on this basis that females are discriminated upon, since they have always been seen as weak and inferior, based on their gender construct.

However, the understanding of the biological sex and gender should not be confused with the well-known biological differences among people and the English grammatical categories of masculine, feminine, and neuter. Sex is biologically determined, and it is completely controlled by features such as physiology and anatomy, hormones, and genes. West and Zimmerman (1987:125) make some clarifications on this:

In the beginning, there was sex and there was gender. Those of us who taught courses in the area in the late 1960s and early 1970s were careful to distinguish one from the other. Sex, we told students, was what was ascribed by biology: anatomy, hormones, and physiology. Gender, we said, was an achieved status: that which is constructed through psychological, cultural, and social means.

The above excerpt makes it clear that the terms, sex and gender, are different in every form of perception. Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) notes that to understand gender, it must be separated from sex. She defines sex as “biological maleness or femaleness” and gender as “attributes and behaviors that are shaped by societies and culture that are appropriate for the male and female sex” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997:16). Society and culture play a significant role in defining a person’s gender; that is why the characteristics of gender differ from one society to another. In every society, there are characteristics attributed to males and females. From birth, people are influenced by gendered paradigms which influence family practices and career-building. Similarly, there are expectations of what females and males can do and the ways of doing it in almost every society.

In some cultures, there are expected standards or norms which are required of people based on their gender. Such norms do not only result in differences in behaviour, but also influence the behaviour of males and females in society. There are some societies where women are not allowed to engage in decision-making, education, and leadership. In those societies, women often become the victims of gender inequality and discrimination. A female child is expected to conduct herself in a certain manner that would prepare her to perform domestic roles as a good wife and mother. Hence, culture and traditions become the structures which fine tune the perception of males and females, and the kind of roles they are expected to perform in accordance with their respective gender definition by such society. This informs Akpan and Akpan’s (2022:29) argument that “...cultural expectations have always been responsible for the oppressive practices meted on women in the seemingly male-defined culture”. In the opinion of Akpan (2021:31), “The above...situation has become a fountain from which many African writers, across literary genres, draw their inspirations and themes”; thus, the writers’ social and cultural environments have great influence on the quality of their works.

In African literature, many writers and critics have engaged the concept of gender as far back as when the literature came into prominence. Gender has been discussed within the academic and socio-cultural spaces. The early African male writers also portray gender notions in their various creative works. It is also worthy to state that because of the patriarchal nature of African society, men were the first beneficiaries of the Western education. Thus, they dominated the African literary scene like they did in other areas of life. It would not be so

surprising, therefore, to see that most of their works were representation of their societal values. They portrayed female characters as weak, subordinate, inferior, and incapable of contributing significantly to governance or decision making in the male dominated society. They are seen as objects in the hands and at mercies of their husbands.

Nonetheless, in recent past, the gender perspectives have changed as female critics and writers, as well as some male authors have risen to the occasion of charting a new course for the female gender. Female writers have woken up to the consciousness of telling the true qualities of African women, correcting the hitherto battered image of female characters in African literature, especially those fictions authored by males. Such female writers include Buchi Emecheta, Akachi Ezeigbo, Zaynab Alkali, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Chimamanda Adichie, Unoma Azuah, Chika Unigwe among others. In prose genre for example, Nwapa in *One is Enough* creatively portrays the woman as an individual that is strong and self-reliant, thoughtful, and capable of shaking off the shackles of patriarchal burden, thereby becoming free to make her personal decisions and choices, and taking absolute control of her destiny. The commitment on the part of these authors in exposing these women realities is in tandem with the sacred responsibility of a writer and, also underscores the all-important role literature plays in the society. Okpiliya and Akpan (2020:52) aver that: "As members of the society and as part of the permutations occurring within the society, writers are left with no choice than to contend with, through their creative outputs, those issues that undermine the very essence of the society".

However, the drama genre has not received prominent attention in gender discourses in African literature, even though it is the earliest genre. Akpan (2023:722) notes that "... literary form and content are very vital in the critical analysis of a text because the analysis of one dimension without a specific strong ground results in a haphazard, distorted, and shallow understanding of, and conclusion on the text". Literary forms here, by extension, implies literary works of different structures or genres. For instance, it is the structural arrangement of novels and drama which really differentiates each of them, although authors may pursue the similar themes. However, the importance of the peculiarities of the different genres or forms cannot be overemphasized in every critical analysis.

Worthy of note is the fact that from antiquity, as one the earliest forms of African literature, drama has been a source of education, correction of social ills, and entertainment. This assertion aptly supports Affiah, Amaku, and Akpan's (2022:64) assertion that: "From its humble beginnings in village squares, to church concerts/travelling theatres and onto national and international theatres, Nigerian drama has metamorphosed into a colourful canvas of indigenous and foreign aesthetics geared towards inspiring societal change". Thus, gender discourse within the drama genre becomes worthy of critical attention. It is against this backdrop that the researcher interrogates "Gender Dynamics and Female Activism in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*", not only to examine gender issues in the drama genre, but also interrogate the playwright's perception of, and representation of gender discourses in his work.

### **Synopsis of the Play**

Published in 1977, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* is a political satire that mirrors the post-colonial leadership, especially the military rule in Nigeria. The play revolves around Major

Lejoka Brown and his family. Lejoka-Brown is a soldier who fought during the Congo war, and returned alive. While in Congo, he gets married to his American Toronto Liza, without telling her that he has a family back in Nigeria. Liza is an educated woman who believes in liberal principles of life. On her arrival in Nigeria, it dawns on her that the Major is married to two other women, Mama Rashida and Sikira.

Lejoka-Brown leaves his flourishing cocoa farm for partisan politics. He canvasses for votes from every angle and also seeks the support of the market women president in order to get votes from the market women. To achieve this, he gets married to Sikira, the daughter of the president of Market Women Union. The Major refuses to take positive advice from his supporters rather, he insist in his military surprise and attack approach to electioneering campaign.

The return of Liza to his house turns things around, because not only has she opposed the polygamous belief of Lejoka-Brown, she also unites the women to fight the excesses of her husband. She immediately changes the orientation of Mama Rashida and Sikira who has always lived under the dictate and fear of their husband, Lejoka-Brown. She educates them, and persuades Sikira to join politics. In the end, Sikira joins the National Liberation Party, and gains much popularity, such that she becomes the flag bearer of the party, while Lejoka-Brown is dropped and expelled from the party because of his highhandedness. Mama Rashida moves to Lagos to find a better condition of living. Liza returns to her medical practice her abroad, while the Major is left alone to regret all his bad decisions and actions.

### **Gender Dynamics and Female Activism in the Play**

#### **▪ The Notion of Female Inferiority**

Every work of art is a reflection of the author's immediate environment. For instance, the African writer cannot be completely detached from his environment or the experiences of his people as he settles to write. Eagleton(1976:48) believes that "every literary text in some sense internalizes its social relations of production, ...encodes within itself its own ideology of how, by whom and for whom it was produced". This connotes the fact that the environment or social milieu of the writer influences their works.

The play, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, is a post-colonial text which discusses the interplay between politics and gender in Africa. It furthermore portrays some gender issues in Africa, while presenting a new perspective in the gender narrative in African literature. In Act one of the play, Lejoka-Brown returns from Congo where he fought in the civil war. His return brings joy and as much pains as possible to his wives, Mama Rashida and Sikira. Initially, he goes into cocoa farming business but later on joins politics. As a retired Major in the army, he orders his wives around as slaves, while they obey him with trembling. Also, typical of a traditional African man, he speaks of his wives as ordinary people or children who know nothing. For instance, when Okonkwo, his friend, cautions him to be careful of what he does because his (Lejoka-Brown's) wife is watching, Lejoka-Brown retorts: "... a woman ...hep ...an ordinary woman- hep... woman! What does she known [sic] ..." (Rotimi, 1977:5). This expression is derogatory, and also undermines the potentials of females in the patriarchal society.

Lejoka-Brown's utterances echoes the historical subjugation of females, and an outright opprobrium on the intellectual capabilities and potentials of females. It is this primordial patriarchal assumption of women as ordinary that triggers the master-servant relationship between husband and wife in most traditional African societies. In the play, Lejoka-Brown is portrayed as an abusive and oppressive traditional African man who takes advantage of every circumstance to humiliate the woman. For instance, he sees his wives as mere objects. His wives call him 'my lord', denoting a master and slave kind of relationship. In view of this, Bulkachuwa (1996:15) asserts that "in many areas women are still regarded as chattels to be inherited.... They are forever under the control of either their husband or male relatives...."

Hudson-Weems' (1981) African Womanism emphasizes the liberation of women like Major Lejoka-Brown's wives, through sisterhood and self-naming. It on this basis that Liza's return to Nigeria becomes a turning point in the life of Mama Rashida, and Sikira. They find a new self and expand their tentacles to reach the assumed exclusive circles for men, thereby renaming themselves as strong, smart, and great personalities in society. Thus, the arrival of Liza in Lejoka-Brown's family becomes a turning point for the women.

On realizing that Lejoka-Brown is polygamous and maltreats his wife, Lisa regrets that she left her career only to be reunited with a man who has no respect for his wife's feelings. She reveals that: "Mr Rahman Lejoka-Brown does not have any respect whatsoever for my feelings" (Rotimi, 1977:54). Rotimi, therefore, holds that most traditional African men hardly respect the choices of their wives since they (the men) assert themselves as heads and lords over the women. It is not surprising, therefore, that Lejoka-Brown sees the educated Liza as a threat to his powers, just like how the patriarchal society sees a successful woman as a threat to their existence. His fears are expressed thus:

"I say listeni,  
B.A woman, make you run o!  
Brother listeni,  
Doctor woman, nakatakata\* o!  
If you marry her-  
Ugbarugba\* na him killi you  
I dey tell you...  
Katakadey come..." ( Rotimi, 1981:43).

The above excerpt does not only express Lejoka-Brown's fear, but portrays Liza as a terror he should either be careful of or better run away. It could also be deduced from the excerpt that in African patriarchal society, especially in the Islamic societies, females' education is regarded as a threat to the traditional and cultural values, as well as males' monopoly and dominance of the socio-political space. This is why Hudson-Weems notes in *Africana Womanism* that gender discourse in Africa is more than a mere confrontation with injustice or denial of women's rights, but the activism which consistently interrogate cultural practices which are inimical to the growth and progress of the Africana woman. Thus, Rotimi uses the condition of Lejoka-Brown's wives to speak of some negative aspects of Islamic practices in traditional Nigerian societies, especially as it concerns the rights and privileges of females.

### ▪ **Sisterhood and Self-Enlightenment**

Hudson-Weems' Womanism has among its ethos, sisterhood, complementarity, and family-centeredness. Rotimi portrays these through Liza who quickly forms some bonding with her co-wives to sustain themselves, help one another to grow, and retain their dignity and self-esteem. For instance, Liza teaches Mama Rashida some economic terms like demand and supply, and the strategy she should adopt to have more sales in her egg business. They see themselves as sisters in the struggle against the oppression of their husband, Lejoka-Brown. The malevolence of Lejoka-Brown to his family members foregrounds the oppression and abuse of females in traditional Nigerian societies in particular. It is because of this bitter narrative that the Africana women unite to recreate the world, and redefine themselves. In view of this, Udoette (2014:74), "female consciousness is part of the process of redefining the woman's place within her society and culture." It is this consciousness which ushers in female activism.

Thus, Liza becomes the new consciousness that revolutionizes the perceptions of her co-wives and opens up a new chapter in their lives. Liza teaches Sikira that a woman has no right to tell her husband to go to hell, except there is a very good reason for that. Rotimi uses this to underscore the fact that African women are respectful and cherish those positive aspects of African values. It is on this premise that it could be argued that maltreatment of the Africana woman is not as a result of her unruly or immoral conduct in patriarchal societies, but a deliberate effort by patriarchal men to humiliate women, and equally deny them fundamental rights and privileges under the guise of biased cultural and religious practices. To fight against these socio-cultural obstacles, the Africana women recognise complementarity, sisterhood, and bonding as best tools for victory against traditional absurdities. This is why Liza and her co-wives are bound together by purpose and intentions.

Liza makes Sikira understand that both men and women were created equal by God: "After all, when we boil it down, men and women are created equal, and unless a husband is ready to understand..." (Rotimi, 1977:54). Sikira is so fascinated by this so much that she has to confess to Liza that she likes the fact that everyone is created equal. It is worthy to note that the author uses this to speak volume of the unnecessary oppression of women, especially in the Yoruba culture and the Islamic religion. Using Lejoka-Brown, a Yoruba Muslim, as an example of a suppressive husband, Rotimi is of the view that women in this culture and religion can be liberated through proper orientation and education such as that given Sikira by Liza.

Sikira's enlightenment creates a far-reaching impact such that she wants all of them in the house to form a political party to fight for the freedom of all married women. This is expressed in this statement: "Suppose we form a Party? Form a Party? Yes, for politics! All women in Nigeria ...Married women ... Then we become Prime Ministers and campaign for elections. Then we sing... Freedom for housewives, Freedom for all women..." (Rotimi, 1977:55). Rotimi seems to make a case for political participation of women and for him, there should be political equality for males and females. A gleam from the excerpt above suggests that without political equality for women, they will continue to live as slaves in the patriarchal society, because it is those who have political powers that take major decisions in the country. For women to get justice, they must be there on the decision-making table through their involvement in politics.

▪ **Reconstructing Womanhood through Female Bonding and Resistance to Patriarchal Status Quo**

In the unity of sisterhood, Liza and Sikira resist the excesses of their husband. When asked to go remove the elegant dress and cover up herself like a Muslim wife that she is, Sikira questions her husband on what moral right he has to command her to do everything that pleases him alone. Sikira notes that both man and woman are created equal, and thus, she sees no reason to succumb to Lejoka-Brown's command and threats. She argues: "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! ...what am I in this house, anyway? ...Am I a slave? ... or a housewife?" (Rotimi, 1977:57). It is important to note that while Sikira says all these, Liza is greatly supporting her. Also, Lejoka-Brown attempts to subdue Liza, and make her dress like a Muslim but meets with a fierce counter by Liza. She beats him with a bundle of broom, while Sikira packs her belongings to leave for her mother's house.

The bonding of these two women, and the orientation given Sikira by Liza bring a new dimension in gender discourse in the play. The questioning of Lejoka-Brown's orders by Sikira is a reflection of the new trend in female interrogation of obnoxious patriarchal norms in society, and also the author's questioning of the barbaric cultural and religious practices in his environment. Etuk and Okon (2018), in a related study showing the rise of female protagonists like Ebiere in *Black November* who counter female subjugation, posit that conversations in this fold do not only highlight "the gender imbalance prevalent in the society" but also depict how women in the contemporary society "react to the discriminations against them on the basis of their gender" (Etuk and Okon, 2018:101). Rotimi uses the play to send a message first to the oppressed females in Nigeria, especially those who are suffering under man and his religion. For the playwright, women can conquer the forces of oppression if they unite, and get educated among themselves just like Liza and Sikira have done. He sees the excesses of the patriarchal culture as an oppression which the women must unite to fight in order to gain their freedom.

In view of this, Mallam Gaskiya's emergency meeting with members of the National Liberation Party gives audience to Madam Ajanaku, the president of National Market Women's Union and Sikira's mother. She states that the women are not happy with Lejoka-Brown, especially for maltreating Sikira. She adds that the only thing that will make the Union consider supporting the Party is disqualifying Lejoka-Brown. The women also demand that his replacement must be a woman: "and dis time na woman candidate na him we want, o! woman candidate. No more no less" (Rotimi, 1977:67). Rotimi uses this to state that women's full political participation could be achieved if women, having had the largest number like the National Market Women's Union, demand the right for inclusion and support one another. Also, the specific demand that the party's flag bearer must be a female marks a turning point in the political activism of African women in the twenty-first century Africa, and contemporary Nigeria in particular.

Africana womanism stresses self-naming as a means to actualizing the freedom of women. Hence, the women having regained their self-esteem, demand inclusion in the national political affairs. Also, as Hudson-Weems' womanism acknowledges male complementarity, these women work with Mallam Gaskiya to ensure that they have a better representation through Sikira. Sikira becomes the symbol of socio-political emancipation of females, and Mr

Lejoka-Brown admits that the world has changed: “Forget politics ... women are taking over the world” (Rotimi, 1977:70). The collapse of Lejoka-Brown’s family and political ambition forms a metaphor for the destruction of the old order of the marginalization and oppression of females in the patriarchal African society like Nigeria. Similarly, this foregrounds the ability of the African woman to rise above patriarchal bars, and set new frontiers for a developed, tolerant, and prosperous society.

Through characters like Liza, Sikira, and Madam Ajanaku, Rotimi portrays females as people who have the same socio-political rights as men. He shows that females are capable of taking decisions that favour them, while contributing to national growth and development. The author sees females as strong and reliable people who should be given opportunity to contribute their quota at any level of governance. Rotimi envisions a Nigerian society in which women will shake off the shackles of oppression, gain independence, and have equal political participation at all levels of national politics.

### Conclusion

The study has attempted to interrogate gender perspectives in Rotimi’s (1977) *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. From the analysis, it is revealed that females are looked down on by sexist males in the text. The beginning of the text reveals males’ obsession with power which equally makes them see women as weak and inferior. Also, the study shows that through female bonding, and sisterhood, the females have been able to successfully fight against oppression and subjugation. Similarly, they have reconstructed womanhood in the African tradition through the womanist tools. Again, they gain political equality through unity of purpose and demand for social justice and political inclusion. Thus, the paper stresses that females’ activism begins with healthy collaborations among themselves.

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