

THEMATIC UNIVERSALITY IN J P CLARK-BEKEDEREMO'S *THE WIVES REVOLT, OZIGI SAGA AND SONG OF A GOAT*

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Abstract

John Pepper Clark Bekederemo as one of Nigeria's foremost dramatist is often described as a first generation writer. His creative outputs usually reflect the stories of his motherland. A unique attribute of his plays is the constant disruption of the norm. Through a historical purview, the dramatist and poet exhibits his internal dialogues by writing plays that delve into the situations of his motherland, Nigeria. He explores themes that strive to question the status-quo and disrupts narratives. Using *The Wives Revolt, Ozidi* and *Song of a Goat and Other Plays* this paper explores themes that echo the struggles for supremacy, women struggle for recognition in decision making within the society, distribution of assets, male infertility amongst other major thematic preoccupations in the selected plays. These themes reflect the conditions of humanity that readers all over can identify with. The relevance of the issues in the selected plays gives Clark Bekederemo's works the universality being explored in this study. The paper employs literary text analysis using qualitative approach to reveal the universality of Clark-Bekederemo's thematic preoccupation in a way that cut across culture and race. It discovers that the state of universality in the selected plays addresses issues not just peculiar to the Ijaw people but that which cuts across borders. Readers and audience alike can identify with issues treated in the plays and make comparison to what happens in real life.

Keywords: Culture, Motherland, Themes, Supremacy, Universality,

Introduction

The theme of universality is regarded as the hallmark of great literature. Literary works are judged on the extent to which they depict the 'universal human condition'. Students of literature are told that to be located in a particular time, place and person and yet be able to represent millions, for all times, places and ages is what makes a literary work valuable. What makes Shakespeare, Dante and Goethe great writers is because they represent the 'universal human condition', by combining the universal with the particular. It appeals to the sensibility of all readers as they can relate to their writings on the personal level and find a just depiction of his/her own feelings and emotions. (Waseem Filza 2013)

ClarkBekederemo plays features themes that expounds the human condition. He is "...very concerned with the business of people living together, owning things together and squabbling over common property, starting with the family and on to the state."(*The New York Times* of 20 Dec, 1985) The focus on human condition is perhaps a major reason for the universality status his plays assumes in this study. By choosing to focus on issues that echo the situations of the Ijaw people, some of the themes explored in the plays also, reflects matters that are germane to colonised areas in Africa. Drama which is a re-enactment of the imaginary lives of different characters on stage gives Clark-Bekederemo an opportunity to present problems inherent within a certain tribe, tackle it and by so doing ensuring that he arouses the consciousness of his audience to the shortcomings of their society. The awakening that follows each presentation to the audience brings to the fore the thematic concerns of the plays. Through this, each presentations garners relevance. This essay seeks to highlight major themes in the plays of Clark-Bekederemo chosen for this essay, with this, prove that the concerns raised in his plays attains a universality status as it champion issues that affects a group but at the same time echoes a more universal discourse that is still relevant in several literary works.

The Play: The Wives Revolt

The Wives Revolt is a comedy, with its action set in the Niger Delta region of Eastern Nigeria, inhabited by the Ijaw. The play primarily deals with issues of conflict and conflict resolution. The play is remarkable in itself because it seeks to bring to the fore gender related issues within the community of Erhuwaren making it satirical in nature. The play which is in six

parts: the proclamation, the dissent, the walkout, the lullaby, the return and the reclamation; has the first three acts earmarking the displeasure of the women both on a domestic and political level about how decision making takes place. The concluding three acts reflects the resultant effects of the women's decision to stake a walk-out on their husbands. Clark-Bekederemo shows that when decisions favours a certain class in the society alone, it gives chances for the other aggrieved class to take actions as a form of rebellion in a bid that the initial decisions might be revised to accommodate everyone in the society. Through the character of Koko and Okoro, Clark-Bekeredemo exposes that the men of Erhuwaren considers their women as scatterbrains without the assistance of their male folk. The plot of this satirical comedy is simple and straight forward which is set in the Ijaw regions which leads to the re-enactment of the lives of the people in that region emphasizing on their cultural belief as regards the place of the women. The characters are made to show personal behaviours, emotions, desires, actions and qualities. Several techniques are used to bring out the uniqueness of each character. Okoro is Koko's husband and he is portrayed as the image of the men of the society who still believe that women cannot function well in politics. Koko herself, a wife, represents the women's plight in a society where gender inequality is prevalent as well as the revolutionary mover of women's liberation movement. Idama on the other hand is Okoro's friend and he represents sanity, moderation and the ideal friend. He is a made to fit as a woman activist although in a subtle form but at least, he believes in the need for women to at least be given the right to own property and participation in politics of the state.

Idama: well right now they are asserting their right to own and keep property. p.21

The language as used in *The Wives Revolt* is full of riddles, proverbs, as well as scornful or mocking words. For instance, the use of riddles, proverbs and idiomatic statement pervades the play giving it a domesticated form which is peculiar to the setting of the play.

Koko: Goats have no language that anybody in his right senses would hear, so don't try selling me cake that no child will buy. p.4

'...Now I know that there really are bags in the hedge.p.10

...You wait and see. You beat a child, and you say he should not cry...'p.11

Idama:Some of us are cats on our feet... p.29

Okoro: That talent is cheap. The armed robber doesn't even need it..." p.29

The translation of words directly from native language into English language is also prevalent in the play simply as a result of the author having the intention of saying the words in the exact way of the native language of the people of Erhuwaren (Urhobo) in order for the reader to actually understand the import of the statement made in the play.

Ozidi is a tragedy, with its action set in the Niger delta region of Eastern Nigeria, which is inhabited by the Ijaw. However, because of his fusion of traditional Ijaw aesthetics with Western poetics, Clark Bekederemo has modified the conventionally defining characteristics of tragedy as contained in Aristotle's Poetics. As indicated by Dan Izevbaye (1995), *Ozidi* is also a gender sensitive text. Through the story teller, Clark Bekederemo presents the Ijaws as a people that celebrate strong masculine attributes at the expense of the womenfolk, but he subverts this by making women central to the salvation of the cursed Orua. One gets a sense of gender imbalance in power relations in Ijo society when , for example, the story teller dismisses almost with contempt the old woman who has come on stage to ritualistically cleanse the arena of evil spirits saying: 'tut, tut, tut, woman, now you buzz off yourself! We men have important affairs of state to consider right now' (5). He further objectifies women and implies that they exist solely to satisfy men's desire as he categories them with material things and children in his prayer to the gods and ancestors: 'Please give us good wives, /give us good children, and give us good money too. However, at the level of the supernatural order, Clark Bekederemo reverses this male domination by placing the possibility of Orua's salvation in the hands of a female deity, Oyin Tamara. Instead of privileging women over men, Tamara stands for a harmonious combination of animus and anima, male and female elements of the society. It is therefore in obedience to Tamara's will that Oreame, a powerful witch, seeks assistance from Bouakarakarabiri, an equally powerful wizard, so that together (as man and woman) they can prepare Ozidi the son for his mission to avenge his father's death and restore Orua to the gender-balanced harmonious, divine order that excessive

masculinity has blinded them to. *Ozidi* has effectively brought into cultural translation both western poetics and African aesthetics in the manner that many African writers, such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara and a host of other first generational dramatist have done. Through his fusion of the English language with the Ijaw idiom, he has enhanced the tragic effect and indeed the artistic quality of the play.

Song of a Goat is another tragedy that reflects characters that perform roles that are typical and appropriate to their social status. The play tells the story of a fisherman whose impotence leads his frustrated wife to consult a masseur. The masseur advises the wife to conceive a child with her husband's brother. After the affair has been consummated, both the husband and his brother commit suicide, In *Song of a Goat* the drama revolves around 'domestic problems and the effect of the society on those problems'p.179. Zifa's dilemma is significant because of his effort to conform and attain the accepted standard of his society. His individuality is therefore of little importance within the society. The seriousness of the play lies in Zifa's impotence. Impotence is a great disadvantage in a community such as one within the Ijaw tribe. This is because Zifa sees himself losing everything that makes a man in an African society. Through the subject of impotence and the challenges faced by a woman who cannot have children, in a patriarchal society such as Africa, the fault is placed on the feet of the woman. When she decided to take Tonye as a lover and gets pregnant it is a statement for the community to see that the fault is not hers but that of her husband, Zifa. This way Clark-Bekederemo has been able to raise the issue of society's wrongful accusation of the women when it comes to procreation.

Universality of Themes in Clark-Bekeremo Selected Plays

Universality as a concept is simply the state of being prevalence everywhere with similitude in knowledge, interests or issues. It is in this light that the plays of Clark-Bekederemo would be examined with special attention placed on his comedy the *Wives Revolt* and two of his tragedies; *Ozidi Saga* and *Song of a Goat*. Clarks-Bekederemo choice of thematic preoccupation in his dramatic narratives makes his plays a success as they address issues not just peculiar to the Ijaw people but that which cuts across borders. Readers and audience alike can identify with issues that occur in the plays and make comparison to what happens in real life. Universality of themes such as that of protest, institutional corruption, domesticity,

underdevelopment of oil regions in Nigerian, the primacy of women, gender equality, unequal distribution of wealth, and corruption, and male infertility.

Gender Issues as a Universal Theme

Ezeigbo (1996) states that ‘the responsibilities and limitations of being female in a male dominated society are realities that are constantly in the consciousness of every Nigerian Woman. It is, therefore, apparent why the gender narrative is one that remains germane. Gender issue refers ‘to how the society defines women differently from men. It is about roles and power relations’ (Akinkuotu and Atughonu Trueman 2012). Often, the roles which each sex plays is determined by the society. Attributing roles to male and female is regarded as gender attributes, a situation in which the society assigns characteristics and functions to males and females (Adebile, Obasoro and Akintade, 318). Mbanefoh, (2004) opines that in Africa society, naturally, males are expected to be aggressive, independent, rational and assertive, but females as gentle, submissive, dependent, passive and relatively emotional. In *The Wives Revolt*, Men make the rules and women are expected to accept and obey the rules. In *Ozidi*, women are silenced by the men in the society and in *Song of a Goat*, it becomes the duty of the woman to produce a child for the family. The playwrights depict the diverse gender issues that are at the centre of conflicts in the plays.

Women in Politics

Can a woman become President? Yes, a woman can. The ‘women in politics’ narrative remains crucial for national development. The margin of men to women in politics worldwide is still wide. In Africa, Nigeria, the percentage of women in politics still leaves much to be desired. Clark-Bekederemo’s consistent depiction of male supremacy in terms of governance continues to echo an important societal flaw. The role of women in nation building remains a topical issue across the globe and in Nigeria, it is even more serious as Nigeria has recorded a much lower percentage of women participation in both elective and appointed roles. In a paper presented by Mrs Oloyede Oluyemi for the National Bureau of Statistics (Abuja, Nigeria), she posits that 6.7% of women are currently involved in elective and appointive roles in Nigeria which is a low percentage as compared to the expected 35% women inclusion in elective and appointive positions. She continues her presentations by identifying some of the challenges that affect women’s’ ability to participate in politics and appointive

roles in the country. These challenges range from patriarchy, stigmatization, low level of education, meeting schedules, financing, political violence, religious and cultural barriers. These challenges echo the themes in the play, *The Wives Revolt* and the seriousness of exploring how the themes realistically portray some of the ongoing challenges women face as modern women striving to get their voices heard through adequate representation in politics. Tina Odebowale (2012:187) argues that as a result of political re-awakening and awareness more women are participating in politics however, the chauvinistic disposition of men still ensures that men make the rules while women opportune to be in politics are instructed on what to do.

Male Infertility as a Universal Theme

The virility of men in most African society is verified by the children of his loins, yet, in most African countries, 'women carry the main burden of infertility as they appear to be 'blamed', often solely, for a couple's childlessness (Savage, 1992). In *Song of a Goat*, Clark-Bekederemo exhumes a serious and importance discourse in marriage that most writers do not dwell on; The impotency of the man of the house. Rather 'they are even blamed for challenges related to infertility because in such patriarchal communities, men cannot be infertile. It is as if there is a lot wrong with their wombs, without looking at the potential defects of manhood', as stated by Baloyi (2019). Infertility in men is not a problem peculiar to the Ijaw people in the Niger Delta, it is a global challenge that continues to arouse scientific research and literary representations.

Conclusion

Clark-Bekederemo's explores universality through the contemporariness of his themes which although set in his Ijaw native land also echo the many issues facing other societies too. His successful literary engagement with intertextuality in the selected plays shares a commonality with other modern writers. His complex character creation provides a vantage position to subject his male characters to a psychoanalytic test by propping into their subconscious state of the mind. The contemporaneity in Clark-Bekederemo's plays cannot be overlooked as he is as contemporary as modern writer such as Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo in her trilogy; *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), *House of Symbols* (2001), *Children of the Eagle* (2002) who exemplifies literary novels that focus on women, gender issues and women in politics. Just as

Ayobami Adebayo's *Stay With Me* (2018) tilts towards matters of male infertility, Buchi Emecheta's novels all portray women as second class citizens and these creative artists continue to depict different issues that concern human relations.

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