

Feminism or Total Revolution? Ideological Reading of Iyorwuese Hagher's *Mulkin Mata*

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Feminism in African drama has become synonymous with revolution. This is because feminists do not only believe that the struggle for equality involves just 'speaking back' but a total and concerted, and sometimes violent, upstaging of patriarchal authority. The paper discusses *Mulkin Mata*, a play written by Iyorwuese Hagher and holds that the playwright uses sex as an instrument of socio-political and economic liberation for his society. It stresses that the strength of the play lies in its commitment to the subject of revolution, while defining its necessities or impossibility, its heterogeneous socio-historical contexts, its prospects and possible directions. At the end, the paper concludes that the playwright uses the Women Revolutionary Government in the play (with its ideology of total revolution) as a metaphor for military rule, which he castigates vehemently. Therefore, the play goes beyond the mere search for feminism, ideologically speaking, and addresses the question of good and bad governance in Nigeria and Africa.

Keywords: Feminism, revolution, drama, governance, Africa.

INTRODUCTION: FEMINISM AND REVOLUTION

(Wo)men's solidarity is founded upon rebellion. And rebellion, in its turn, can only find its justification in this solidarity – Albert Camus, *The Rebel* [1]

Meanwhile, the war rages on – Hagher, *Mulkin Mata* [2].

Over time, women or feminism and revolution have come to be passengers in the same boat, heading for the same destination – change; change that is achieved through an overthrow of all structures of domination and obvious or perceived female subjugation. Feminism, traditionally, is the recognition of, and the fight against, the subjugation of women in all spheres of life in the hope of attaining equality of status and opportunity with men. This 'fight' is what really links feminism with revolution since the patriarchal society with all its structures must be overthrown before this equality can be fully attained. In this sense, feminist consciousness is often associated with the battle of the sexes, which strengthens our two opening quotations. Yet, this, as often seen, also goes beyond mere feminine consciousness to the obsession outside of the woman question.

In Africa, and particularly Nigeria, women have in the past played relevant roles in revolutionizing their respective societies; patriarchal inhibitions notwithstanding. Women in such cases both sought to have control over their lives and fought against forces that affected them or through hard work carved a niche for themselves, which made them unequivocally and irrepressibly relevant throughout history. Indeed, some become 'saviours' of their societies. Inikpi of Igalaland, Emotan and Idia of Benin, Moremi of Ife, Amina of Zazzau and Kambassa of Bonny are only a few of the many women who attained enviable heights of heroism [3].

Thus, women have occupied enviable positions within the patriarchal societies as they struggle to exert these positions within the class dichotomy that determined their social status. It is within this context that the woman question today is addressed around sexual politics or the politics of gender, which is also seen as symptomatic of the female struggle against oppression and for self-expression, leading to both peaceful and violent revolutions. However, the issue of revolution has been

looked at variously. Adele Jinadu [4] probes into the relationship between violence and revolution in the ideologies of Marx, Lenin and Fanon. The questions raised border on the popular opinion that associates violence with revolution, “a spectre of destruction, brutality and change, a reaction... is partly fed by the pronouncements of revolutionaries.”

According to Marx and Lenin [5], violence is an inevitable evil necessitated by the oppression and violence of the bourgeois state apparatus. Fanon [6] corroborates this position when he asserts that violence is only used by the oppressed as a defensive mechanism. The contradictions between the classes (oppressor and oppressed) underscore the basic objective law of theory and praxis. Therefore, when the violence becomes inevitable, the clash itself becomes an opportunity for sober reflection irrespective of any adverse effects [7]. This is why Udentia [8] has pontificated that the attendant tragedy from such a clash of revolutionary forces of change is purgative, regenerative and cathartic. We shall return to this later in the paper.

Within the nexus of these inferences, Robert Brustein [9], identifies three types of revolt in drama – messianic, social, and existentialist. Messianic revolt occurs when the dramatist rebels against God with a Luciferian intent to take the latter’s place; in social revolt, the dramatist rebels against the conventions, morals and values of the social organism. Existentialist revolt occurs when the dramatist rebels against the conditions of his existence. The revolutions discussed in this paper may conveniently fit into the last two. However, in feminist or liberation radical literature, the discrimination of women is assumed on two levels: economically by the system, and exploited sexually by men (seen as sex objects). Thus, a study of *Mulkin Mata* brings one to the question of what really is the goal of the women in the play: Is it equality with men (traditional feminism) or an outright overthrow of the authority of men or the patriarchal society (radical feminism, with total revolution)? [2].

***Mulkin Mata*: Feminism or Total Revolution?**

Mulkin Mata takes a radical viewpoint into the woman issue by exploiting the dynamics of revolution in a largely patriarchal society. Importantly, the dramatic conflict is really not the initial bloody revolution but is built around the obstinacy of the Women Revolutionary Government (WRG) to the sceptre of power. The men have been found out to have woefully failed in all conceivable ramifications and so, “the women of Africa came together to save our beloved nation Africa from disaster and collapse”.

On a superficial level, the play opens up to the search for a redefinition of the role of women within the patriarchal society with the latter’s prolongation of the vicious circle of retrogressive leadership, of civilian men

handing over power to military men in the same fashion. A liberal mind, however, would expect that since men have had to themselves for centuries the offices in government, the ultimate result of the women’s revolt should have been to share these offices equally since the watchword in feminism is equality of opportunities. But nay! not these women. In a manner characteristic of military interventions in Africa, the first step taken by the WRG on take-over of office is the abolition of all existing laws regardless of the merit or otherwise.

The propelling force of the play is much more than the search for identity or equality for that matter. It is a revolt against, and total overthrow of, patriarchy. The title of the play itself - “*Mulkin Mata*” – simply, is Women’s Government or Women’s rule, exclusively. The total femaleness of the new government is achieved from the beginning with the playwright’s dramatic technique of achieving a near reality through the box office in his stage direction.

The usual roles of issuing tickets and ushering people into the theatre reserved for pretty young ladies must be taken over by young men who are as pleasant as possible. To fully attain this height, the women, led by the revolutionary Hajija Rekia Usumanu, have taken over the governance of Africa in “a prolonged and bloody revolution” leading to a holocaust. The revolution is therefore predicated on Simone de Beauvoir’s thesis that women’s condition can only change at the price of a revolution, and the belief by some that:

Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them [6].

Interestingly, the aim of the revolution at this stage however tragic, is geared towards becoming “purgative, regenerative and cathartic; it does not suppress, it doesn’t disillusion for sacrifices must be made, bloodshed, before the full flowering of the human spirit” [8].

Again, if the above is really the hope of the WRG, then, there is an obvious contradiction in the promulgation of the three-pronged decrees adopted as a theory of action. And this is what this paper shall carefully consider. Decree one - ban from political offices – bans all men from holding both political offices and leadership of the family for a century. Accordingly, members of the All-African Women Revolutionary Council, Ministers, Governors, and chairs are all women since men are now “totally incapable of taking part in government” [2].

Reversal of roles is decree two. This orders a swapping of duties; men are to take over all chores hitherto undertaken by women, namely cooking of meals, baby-sitting, cleaning of houses, and tending to clothes and the farm. Men are also to become telephone operators, receptionists, stewardesses and petty traders. In fact,

they (women) become their husband's husbands or vice versa. It is to a similar development that Adaku in Onwueme's *Go Tell it to Women* reacts, rather lamentably:... that is our new disease... the family head must be turned upside down and men must hand over power to women. Wives must lie on top of their husbands for women to show power and live better. I do not ... I cannot understand the whole message! I even hear that in Oyibo land now, men marry men and women marry women [10].

Decree three – on sex prohibition – is aimed at giving the women the freedom and more opportunity to work without distraction from their husbands (nay, 'wives!'). It forbids outright any form of sexual intercourse, and it seems to be particular on men, hence "any man caught attempting to break this decree will be castrated" [2]. But, ironically, this only helps to promote prostitution as boys and men take to visiting brothels, and clandestine sexual arrangements between husbands and wives, leading to a weakening of the revolutionary ideals.

As an affirmative action, the Revolutionary Council pursues the execution of these decrees with all vigour. The obvious demarcation created then complicates the gender question. The men, besides the aforementioned, have been accused of many other crimes – greed, 'chop-l-chop' philosophy, financial recklessness, unreasonableness, chauvinism, crudity, inhumanity, shamelessness, cruelty, spinelessness, oppression and repression. Having got enough reason to hang the men, Usumanu orders to "tell the men they have no right to have African children named after them" [2]. The scenario then completely turns to be a battle of the sexes and a dichotomised society recreated through matriarchal viewpoint. The nihilistic measures taken by the WRG is further strengthened through the banning of male football, seen as a 'barbaric pastime', and the poisoning of the Lake Nyon to eliminate the rebellious 'desperados' (male specie). This does not affect the women because they have been immunized against the poisonous gas but the resultant effect is the death of thousands of people and property worth a million 'Africs'.

The resoluteness of the revolution can also be seen in the words of Usumanu about Idi Amin:

I shall personally arrest him, and boil him alive, cut him to piece, fry him piece by pieces, grind him to powder and burn him up and scatter his ashes to fertilize the Sahara [2].

At this stage every form of diplomacy is lost. What the WRG has done, in all, falls short of the thesis that: By utilizing various organizations to educate themselves they hope to change men's attitude toward women and to pinpoint areas where both male and female attitudinal changes are necessary. Finally, since they are aware that men hold both the yam and the knife, as women they *must diplomatically demand their fair share* [11].

But alas! The WRG does not do this. Rather, their vision is to the extreme opposite direction. It is total revolution against patriarchy and the enthronement of matriarchy. It is partly for this reason that Usumanu's vision for the WRG is seen as 'funny' and crazy: "...who hear woman de do gofment over men before? *Na Igboh* dey turn her head" [2].

The dramatic conflict intensifies towards a crescendo as, despite the wooing of the WRG by some men especially traditional rulers (a pointer, no doubt, to the rottenness of our traditional system), the men too fight back with the poisonous experiment to "eliminate the female species in our land," because "these women are an abomination so great that we should waste no time at all" [2]. Mohammed Ag Mohammed is of the opinion that the only way to "curb the menace of the women's rule" is to "declare a holy jihad against the great Satan (Usumanu), sitting in Addis Ababa and the unholy evil known as women" [2]. This, evidently, is a reply to the selfish opinion of the Emir of Libya of an "all Jihad against all the men" and to sell them to "those infidels in America" [2]. The position of the Emir of Libya only shows the lot of men who support the feminist revolution for selfish ambition or gains. It also portrays the obvious profligacy and betrayal of trust in the traditional rulers seen in their inconsistency in the battle and quest for favour with the Women Revolutionary Government. But, again, these attacks and counter-attacks may only be explainable in the words of Frederick Douglass that:

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favour freedom, and yet depreciate agitation are men who want crops without ploughing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters [8].

Thus there is a somewhat equilateral action and reaction on all sides of camps. But, in all this reign of folly, Hassana Diakite forsee the weakness of the revolution and voices, very frankly, her mind to the women:

You are all hypocrites, the men are necessary evil. Let us all call them to a dialogue, and let us together with them stabilize the country. It is not enough to be economically sound. People in this country need the liberty to fully associate with each other without discrimination. We have proved the equality of our sexes in leadership. Let us also pursue happiness together [2].

In this lies the call for an understanding, a dialogical process that advocates for only a peaceful revolution that will ultimately "initiate and promote pragmatic solutions to practical problems" [12], not the individualism and narcissism of the Women's leader, Usumanu. This visionary opinion of Hassana earns her the wrath of the WRG leading to her summary execution. Hagher's

sympathy here seems to be with Hassana in her forthrightness; thus, she becomes “our martyr towards absolutism, towards a reactioning... excessive fundamentalism, towards a jihadist approach by the women” [13].

The playwright, through Hassana, acknowledges the economic success of the regime especially in the area of payment of the country's foreign debt. But economic stability is not enough, the playwright seems to be saying – peace, harmony and liberty are more desirable and must be pursued faithfully. This is what the WRG lacks and therefore all the success with its revolutionary ethos is marred by the hypocrisy, apparent monomaniac and obsessive military mechanization of Usumanu exposed through the summary execution of dissident voices.

Another factor that makes the women's revolution total and retaliatory is found in decree two – making the men to wear skirts, lipsticks, earrings and high-heel shoes. The motive behind this is to make them see how they have hitherto deformed the women's body [2]. The women must be working with the conviction that “women are the creatures of an organized tyranny of idlers (men)” [14]. Once this tyranny is eliminated, the WRG hopes to establish an alternative government of exclusively women on the continent.

The mystery voice in the play is the spirit of, and call for total revolution, stretching among other things, to the monstrosity of the castration of Second Man, ‘downing’ the use of the title ‘Mrs’ and forcing into exile of Alhaji Sale and one Chief Abutu by his many wives as their punitive measure against him. The cases of First Man and Second Man become the first practical doorways to the execution of the three-pronged decrees. The government in all its modus operandi is anti-male, for radical feminists like Usumanu do not only believe that “social equality can be achieved nowhere without the feminist revolution being paramount” [14]; as such, they look forward to a totalised swapping of roles under matriarchal authority. Usumanu and her ‘faithful’ colleagues pay deaf ears to the fact that; Real liberation is when we can affirm all that we are, our tenderness and our sensitivities, all those things that have been considered feminine before, which are good things, and also our strength and our courage and our assertiveness [15].

This truth is what Hassana sees when she openly inveighs against her fellow revolutionaries and advises them to pursue the path of peace. But instead, in their rabid desire for survival, Usumanu and her team join the alliance of tyrants who are preoccupied only with their own security and mete inhuman treatment on other human beings, only reminiscent of ancient Athenian democrats.

The obstinacy of the women demonstrated by their continued holding on to power provokes an unending raging war. In the first place, they have seized power through a violent and bloody military coup. But Hagher, in

his advocacy for the spirit of synergy achieved through a dialogical process, sends to all, a caveat that “as Africans we must overcome the temptations of replacing one form of oppression with another” [2]. This equally takes us through the playwright's philosophy of staying with the prey against the predator even if the predator of yesterday becomes the prey of today, and it can be seen in his sympathy with Hassana when the latter changes her ideological posture. However, the play's message becomes unambiguous in the mouth of Professor Deborah Ogunde that; *Until the African women, the peasant men and women and the urban workers unite in control of the helms of state, our present leaders shall continue to divide us on the grounds of religion, sex and geographical origins* [2].

It is glaring from this that the WRG becomes a springboard for the playwright's search for responsible and responsive leadership, a metaphor for good and bad governance in Africa.

Conclusion

Unlike Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* [16] which utilizes the embargo on sex to stop physical combat or the lack of it as an instrument of pacifism, Hagher, in *Mulkin Mata*, uses sex as an instrument of socio-political and economic liberation for his society. Thus, while *Mulkin Mata* is a play that addresses the ongoing gender debates and more importantly, the leadership crisis of the playwright's country, the playwright uses the Women Revolutionary Government (with their ideology of total revolution) as a metaphor for military rule, which he castigates vehemently. Therefore, the play goes beyond the mere search for feminism, ideologically speaking, and addresses the question of good and bad governance in Nigeria and Africa.

The strength of *Mulkin Mata* lies in its commitment to the subject of revolution, while defining its necessities or impossibility, its heterogeneous socio-historical contexts, its prospects and possible directions [17]. This commitment is not to the revolution of the ‘bumpy-chested’ charging down the domain of patriarchy as the women pursue in the play. It is rather a revolution that ultimately brings peace. Thus, Hagher's ideological focus seems to find a home in the opinion that crises are not overcome by a few hasty and ‘nervous attempts’ but through a gradual and controlled process and advances towards attaining the ‘new’ vision [18].

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