

Women Without Men: Feminist Perspectives in Akayi's *Mary, When Will You Marry* and Olu'Dolapo Ojediran's *Omolewa*

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Abstract:

This study investigates how the empowered African woman negotiates her identity in two feminist plays written by prominent Nigerian female playwrights. By delving into the themes of female empowerment and self-assertion in Akayi's *Mary, When Will You Marry* and Olu Dolapo Ojediran's *Omolewa*, these Nigerian women playwrights portray strong female protagonists who break away from oppressive relationships, they find themselves in. These feminist plays by African women writers corrects the misogynistic depiction of women from the institutionalized sexism of contemporary African life. This study debunks the patriarchal notion that marriage is the one and only path for women's fulfillment. The sense of fulfillment of the female lead characters in these plays, even though there is no man in their lives, stems from their economic independence and this shows that a woman can be happy outside marriage.

Keywords: Gender, Stiwanism, Marriage, Women Empowerment and Patriarchy.

Introduction:

In modern African society, the rise and spread of Western education and Christianity have significantly altered gender power dynamics globally. Also, traditional customs and beliefs have undergone notable changes, initially brought about by colonialism and further propelled by the end of colonial rule and the Nigerian Civil War. Adeline Apena says that "the Nigerian Civil War also known as the Biafra War (1967-1970) transformed social values and almost revolutionized gender relations and attitudes towards sexuality" (Apena 284). There is emergence of a new breed of women as noted by Apena, different from those portrayed in the works of African male playwrights, where women are often marginalized. Carolyn Kumah says that:

As a consequence of the male dominated literary tradition, many of the depictions of African women are reductive-perpetuating popular myths of female subordination. Female characters in male-authored works are rarely granted primary status- their roles often trivialized to varying degrees- and they are depicted as silent and submissive in nature (Kumah 5)

Another recurring theme in the work of African male playwrights is the emphasis on the significance of marriage for women, which highlights their subordinate status. In Patrick Obi's *When Women Go Naked*, for instance, Ogana tells Udenkwo that "the wealth of a woman is an appendage. Its value is only when you attach it to a man behind her even if the man is poor" (37).

This great importance accorded to marriage for a woman is also seen in African novels, most especially, those written by men. In the novel, *Caught in the Storm*, for instance, Mana Tene tells her daughter that "A girl's noblest goal is her home. Yes, her home, a husband and children. This is the greatest happiness (52). Other novels such as Onuora Nzekwu's *Highlife for the Lizards*, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* amongst others team up to underscore the importance accorded to marriage for a woman.

This misogynistic depiction of women in literature, has been a source of concern for many African women writers. In order to correct these negative depictions, African women playwrights endeavor to portray an empowered image of women. Nkiruka Akaenyi says that "Playwrights have harnessed the influential aspect of drama throughout history to offer insightful observations on societal events, leading to positive transformations in human lives and their surroundings" (73).

By doing away with the literary patterns crafted by African male writers, these women writers empower their female characters to articulate their thoughts in a bold manner and act upon them freely. Moreover, these African women writers challenge the notion that marriage is the one and only path for women's fulfillment, allowing their lead female characters to break away from oppressive marital bonds. This thematic shift is evident in works such as Olu Dolapo's *Miss! Mrs! Ms*, *Omolewa* and Akayi's *Mary*, *When Will You Marry?* These women writers showcase female characters who defy patriarchal norms and values, exhibiting a remarkable freedom of expression and a willingness to resist domestic abuse. For instance, Modunke, the protagonist in Olu Dolapo's *Miss! Mrs! Ms*, not only refuses to endure sexual abuse in her matrimonial home but also rejects the institution of marriage altogether—a bold stance that prompts reflection on the choices available to women. Modern experience has shown that sexual abuse is one of the commonest form of abuse against women,

especially the married ones, being victims most of the times. This is because men do not see forced sex with their wives as rape, since tradition has made them to understand that sex is their conjugal rights. Often, married women lack adequate social support to address matters bordering on sexual violence. Akaenyi Nkiruka says that:

There exists an atmosphere of constant fear of sexual molestation and rape seems to become an integral aspect of every woman's existence. This pervasive fear to a great extent imposes limitations on their ability to move freely, interact socially with others, shape their worldview, and even express themselves verbally. Women and girls find themselves constantly relying on their intuition and instincts to navigate social situations (10)

From an African feminist perspective, this study analyzes the themes of female self-assertion and fulfillment as depicted in Oludolapo Ojediran's *Omolewa* and Akayi's *Mary*, *When Will You Marry?* These plays serve as representations of the evolving social values, gender dynamics, and attitudes toward sexuality in post-colonial Nigeria, particularly in the aftermath of the Biafran War. Through a critical examination, this study sheds light on the strategies employed by these female writers to empower their characters and challenge entrenched patriarchal norms, thereby inspiring women to clamour for freedom and chart their own paths to fulfillment. Cakpo-Chichi, Gbaguidi and Djossou say that: "...feminism is the woman's freedom to decide her own destiny, freedom from sex determined role, freedom from society's oppression and restrictions, freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action" (Cakpo-Chichi, Gbaguidi and Djossou 12). In other words, feminism advocates the woman's right to express her opinions and put them in practice freely.

To this end, this study draws on the theory of Stiwanism to raise awareness about women's right to defend their opinions and physical integrity. It also sheds light on the possibility for women to find fulfilment outside marriage.

Theoretical Framework:

STIWANISM, developed by Omolara Ogundipe, stands as a significant theoretical framework for analyzing feminist plays by African women playwrights, and is particularly suitable for this study. This framework examines themes of gender dynamics, societal expectations, and female agency within these works. According to Ogundipe Leslie, "STIWA is about the inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa. Be a stiwanist" (Ogundipe Leslie 229). She says that:

Stiwa means Social Transformation including Women of Africa". I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is not warring with the men, the reversal of role, or doing to the men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society, The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest (Ogundipe Leslie 242).

This theory emphasizes and advocates for the integration of the woman into the different possible spheres of the society, and for the harmonious co-existence of both man and woman in the society.

STIWANISM deals with the exploration of self-identity as its fundamental principle. This study examines how female characters negotiate through their identity beyond the established boundaries of marriage and societal standards. These women actively express their uniqueness and pursue fulfillment beyond conventional societal roles. In a nutshell, STIWANISM furnishes an encompassing theoretical structure for analyzing feminist dramas by African female playwrights, especially in the context of this study. This framework facilitates an examination of themes such as self-identity, metamorphosis, interconnectedness, assertiveness, and narrative control, offering valuable insights into the intricacies of gender dynamics and female empowerment depicted in these works.

Female Resistance to Traditional Gender Roles: A Study of Akayi's *Mary, When Will You Marry*:

In *Mary, When Will You Marry*, Akayi highlights the obnoxious societal expectations or laws that militates against women, especially the unmarried ones. Despite her achievements as a Master's degree holder and economic empowerment, Mary's parents made it clear to her that as far as culture is concerned, unmarried women are incomplete beings, and she is expected to get a husband before she can be regarded as a fulfilled woman. Mary's father even goes a little bit further by giving her an ultimatum to get a husband within a specified period of eight months or risk being forcefully given out to marriage. Even her mother made life so uncomfortable and unbearable for her. Eventually, Mary becomes so emotionally distressed and she tries to find solace in daily consumption of alcohol. However, Mama cautions her to quit alcohol intake as it is unbecoming of her gender, especially as an unmarried woman to do so. This is because Mama feels that she might end up ruining her chances of getting a husband if she persists in daily alcohol intake. Mary is denied so many rights in her father's house. As long as the cultural dictates concerning unmarried women in her society is concerned, she is not allowed to get a house and live alone or even own a car. No wonder Nkiruka Akaenyi says that:

The subjugation of women is pervasive across various communities and ethnic groups in Nigeria, where women are perceived as mere extensions of men, occupying a subservient status. Traditional institutions strongly reinforce gender differences, seeing women as inconsequential, the "insignificant other." This stereotypical view of women, to a large extent, influences the mindset of women, who often internalize and accept this position. Any effort to challenge this norm is met with resistance, with such women being seen as competing with men or trying to disrupt the natural order of things. Consequently, they are frequently labeled as stubborn, out of control, or ill-mannered (86)

Even Mary's educational and economic empowerment makes her a marital suspect, because patriarchy has conditioned men to believe that women's possession of power—whether economically, academically or otherwise—is injurious to the society. Mary is even sternly admonished by her parents for neglecting her care-giving roles as a woman, because this may also ruin her chances of getting married or performing her roles as a wife in the future:

MUMMY: Stop giving excuses! Do you not understand that everything we are teaching you is to groom you for life in your husband's house? This is not about us; it is about your husband. Whether or not your husband is hungry, you have to cook

MARY: Mummy, that mentality is archaic. You are referring to the days of old when there were no mobile phones for real-time communication. See eh, these days, husband and wife call and text each other to decide what to eat, when to eat, or even where to eat. Yes, married people go out to eat in restaurants; it is called a date. Another thing you should know is, men cook too. So, my husband and I could decide to take turns in the kitchen (6)

Here, Akayi uses the dialogue between Mary and her mother as seen above, to illustrate the obsolete and outmoded customs and traditions of the people. The playwright is simply saying here that social role demarcation between the sexes is incapable of sustaining a healthy gender relations in a changing, modern world. Osita Ezenwanebe says that "African men struggle to keep abreast with all the changes around him except those aimed at gender equality. It is such pose as his prolongs conflict and delays its resolution. It brings out the worst in a conflict" (Ezenwanebe 288). Despite the enormous challenges that confronts her in the workplace, Aloysius Orjinta says that "even when everybody in the family have come back from the farm or the place of work, and are fatigued, the onus still falls on the woman to go the kitchen" (Orjinta 107). The representation of the kitchen as being gender-

specific is not peculiar to Akayi's play. In *The Trials*, Okoh makes it obvious that all the spaces in Sotonye's home are gendered. The kitchen for example, is represented in *The Trials* as gender specific, dominated and controlled by either of the two genders, man or woman. The kitchen, for example, is woman specific. It is always mentioned in reference to women's activities. According to Mabel Evwierhoma "Ibiso catalogues women's power and their need for more power, that women want a dual-space operation "to be able to work both inside and outside their homes" (19). Ibiso asks Sotonye "If a man can go to the living room, bedroom, toilet and bathroom, why can't he go to the kitchen?" (24). Sotonye replies "The kitchen is for women". Ibiso counters with "...the barrier between the place for men and women is crumbling down. More and more women now work outside their homes" (24). Sotonye retorts "No matter how high the position of a woman occupies in her office, once she arrives home, she runs into the kitchen..." (25). Jeremiah Methuselah says that "this social construction begins quite early in life in the sense that boys are socialized to more 'manly' activities while women are confined to be homemakers" (Methuselah 129). Additionally, Sani says that even when Western education was brought to the colonies, it was only "geared towards making women good mothers, good housewives and epitomes of elegance and reticence" (Sani 121).

In a nutshell, therefore, Akayi uses her play to examine the myriads of problems confronting unmarried women in a typical African patriarchal set up. Using the play, the writer highlights the need for women to lend a voice against all forms of injustice meted out on them as a result of their sex. Akaenyi Nkiruka says that "the struggle for women's freedom and gender equality can only be achieved with the eradication of the traditional structures, values, laws and customs that cage, suppress and stifle the growth of women. Therefore, she strives to actualize this change and social transformation by employing the

transformative potentials of the theatre (Akaenyi 5).

In the play, Akayi also highlights the subject matter of divorce, especially the stigma associated with it. Mary's friend, Tutu divorces her husband and we are made to understand the circumstances surrounding the failed marriage of Tutu. Tutu says:

TUTU: You see, Mummy, mine is not a divorce, it is independence... liberation! Marriage these days is not what it used to be in your days. You see, these days there is an increased level of moral decadence in the society... or maybe, just maybe, we in our generation do not have the inkling to normalize being mistreated, constantly disrespected and oppressed by our partners (22).

Here, Akayi draws our attention to the cultural traditions, which nurtured women, provide them with an outlook on life, which often works to normalize their predicament as inescapable. Even when Mary dares to challenge this age-long tradition, she realizes that she is not a match to the combined force of her mother and father. She is expected to do everything to safeguard her marriage, when she eventually gets a husband:

DADDY: (Infuriated.) Ke, kin haukace ko? Have you gone mad? Imagine the nonsense you are saying!

MUMMY: That is why she is still single! She scares every man away with her wild mentality. (6)

Even when it is obvious that one of her suitors, John is abusive, her parents refuse to see anything wrong in a man assaulting their daughter. According to her parents, Mary do not have any excuse for rejecting Musa's marriage proposal, simply because he sleeps around with many women. The man's right to sexual freedom, according to Ezenwanebe is "a site for conflict and crisis" (Ezenwanebe 18) Columbus, her brother and a self-acclaimed social media influencer through match-making her for marriage on Instagram is able to court the attention of many suitors for his sister, all of whom she turned down their marriage proposals. Mary's dream of getting

married refuses to materialize, because she discovers that the men in her life wants to use marriage to subjugate her and she does not want to be a traditional domestic woman. She desires equal opportunities with the other men, aiming to establish a mutually supportive and equitable gender relations life with her partner. Through her several encounters with the suitors, who have come for her hand in marriage, we are made to know the kind of persons her parents are. Mary's parents are portrayed as not only insensitive but as greedy pairs. They do not care for their daughter's well-being and are only interested in what they will get from their prospective in-laws. Mary's mother tries to convince her to put on a friendly face, so as to win the heart of a man, irrespective of the fact that most of her suitors are abusive:

MUMMY: Oya, Mary, put on a friendly face, another suitor is here. (MARY is still frowning.) Mary, I do not see a smile on your face. (MARY puts on a forced smile.) No, that is too much... too fake! Be natural. (Doorbell rings again.) (29)

At each stage of her encounter with these men, Mary is assaulted and insulted as well, but her parents refuse to see anything wrong in all these. Their interest lies in getting a husband for Mary, not minding the character of their prospective son-in-law all in the name of removing their shame. One of her suitors, a rich prince, is a symbol of patriarchal pride in need of education for re-orientation and liberation. She sees him as a slave of outmoded society who cling to it because it feeds his own selfishness. He starts by making it known to Mary that he will marry her as the seventh wife. and gives out bags of money to her parents. Here, Akayi mirrors a social milieu where the respect for a man is dependent on how many wives that he has and how wealthy he is. For a man to be respected, it is expected of him to be polygynous and even have concubines. Polygyny becomes a status marker. The society permits a husband to take as many women as he could afford some as wives, others as concubines. In some of Irene Salami-Agunloye's plays, polygyny is also a cherished normative cultural ideal and most of the male characters are usually

polygynous. In *The Queen Sisters*, the Oba has so many wives or queens in his harem because the queens are to give him children and the more children he has, the more he becomes famous. The Oba is not concerned about their complaints for, as he says "...more children, more wives, the more his fame. That is enough reason to make you jubilate" (14). The emotional distress women suffer in this type of polygamous set-up is enough to rob them of their emotions, self-esteem and subdue their potentials. In *The Queen Sisters*, where the wives wait endlessly for the Oba's attention, they resort to talking all day to while away the time. However, some of them weary of this begin to question their condition. Ezenwanebe says that "It is common in contemporary Nigeria for a man to marry up to three wives and keep them in different parts of the country without any of them knowing about the existence of the other until maybe the man dies and his burial brings all the families together" (Ezenwanebe 35).

In Akayi's play, the prince refuses to accept that the African society has indeed undergone some changes and women's participation in the public domain has increased with every change. He says:

PRINCE: Mary, dear. If you are my wife, you would not need a job. You see, I am rich... very rich! I will provide you with everything you need: an estate, luxury cars, vacations, servants, money, money, money... tell me whatever it is you need, and you shall have it, as long as you play your part as a wife (33).

Underneath the princes' insistence that Mary should quit her job, when she becomes his wife is his flair for domination. Mary tries to play the docile woman at first but she knows where to draw the line. When the date fixed for the marriage to take place arrives, she blatantly refuses to marry the prince. Mary's spirit of independence is unacceptable to him. The prince threatens to kill her parents who had earlier collected huge sum of money from him. He physically attacks Mary too. Femi Shaka and Ola Uchendu assert that "Punishment of wives was called chastisement, a term that emphasized the

corrective purpose of the action and minimized the violent nature of the behavior" (Shaka and Uchendu 1). However, the timely arrival of the police officers helps to nip the crisis in the bud. The prince leaves the house to the relief of the occupants. At the end of the play, the social lie created by the society is under radical reconstruction. Neither her parents' callousness nor the brutality by the prince deter Mary from excelling in her chosen career. She acquires a real estate company and built a house for herself. Not only that, she owns her own fleet of cars. The plays highlight the role of education as a tool for empowerment. The play also stresses the need of advocacy for the right and freedom of everyone, regardless of gender.

Patriarchy and Resistance in Olu' Dolapo Ojediran's Omolewa

Omolewa is a play centres on the romantic affair between Omolewa and Alhaji. The eponymous character is an economically empowered woman and she is educated as well. The play raises salient issues as it concerns the right of a woman to make choices, especially as it affects her decision to get married or remain single as the case may be, irrespective of societal expectations. Omolewa, the eponymous heroine of the play, who is a career woman gets pregnant for Alhaji outside wedlock, but she refuses to get married to him. Her decision to remain unmarried is associated with the fact that she is not in agreement with the traditional family setup that Alhaji wants them to embrace. Alhaji, a typical representative of patriarchal values is a man who cannot cope with a sophisticated lady like her. She tells him "Alhaji, you are a traditional man" (11). She then advises Alhaji to go for "some kind of traditional woman that will obey...and do femininity" (10). Most men like Alhaji, are conceding to the demand of the ladies so as to get what they want. Alhaji admits that he is a traditional man, yet "...people move on. Change is taking place and life is all about choices" (11). Alhaji is the type of man that Ogunjide-Leslie advocates for in her Stiwanism. Alhaji says "...give me the chance of proving that not all traditional men want a traditional woman"

(11). This means that sometimes the traditional man wants a non-traditional lady to complement himself. Omolewa enjoys her relationship with Alhaji yet fears to marry him. Alhaji tells her of the expectations of his friends from the relationship between both of them. People feel they know and love each other enough to get married yet Omolewa tells him "I am not cut out for marriage... I am not like other girls that celebrate marriage at the mention of it" (10). Lewa adds that "you know and I know we are in this for play. We are only having each other for enjoyment purposes" (10)

Alhaji seeing that Omolewa refuses to accept his proposal, tries again to convince her that their marriage allows her to keep her baby without facing the social stigma of unwed motherhood. This also fails to perform the magic. Omolewa is of the idea that if Alhaji truly loves her, he should accept their relationship as it is and not consider marriage. This would involve having children out of wedlock, which Alhaji strongly opposes. Alhaji argues that having children outside of marriage would jeopardize their reputations, as no African custom would accept it:

ALHAJI: We can't afford to have a child outside wedlock. It will destroy reputation. We both have reputations to protect.

LEWA: Says who?

ALHAJI: It is religiously wrong; it is culturally bad and socially unacceptable... (70)

Women oppression often finds its roots in socio-cultural norms influenced by various socio-economic, religious, and cultural factors. According to Oluwakemi and Daniel:

The mindset of not bending to any form of the societal rules be it religious, cultural, or social rules is what made the contemporary woman to launch out into the deep by herself. To get along with the politics of a system that is patriarchal, she strives for education or gets herself busy with what can really earn her respect from her society and independence from the men (Oluwakemi and Daniel 13)

Medina is Omolewa's maid and her mindset contrasts with that of her employer. Even though Medina admires and loves Omolewa and her lifestyle, she cannot understand why Omolewa remains unmarried and disapproves of her single status. Medina says "Marry, she no gree marry, (15).

Though Omolewa wants to marry but she suspects that Alhaji would take advantage of their marriage to each other and subjugate her, Because of this fear, she is of the opinion that her freedom will be truncated. Medina thinks marriage is still the option, irrespective of what happens: "...if I marry, I no fit go out the way aunty dey do...I go marry sha" (15). That is Omolewa's choice. Omolewa is an educationally empowered woman who is not prepared to exchange her freedom as a result of marriage. Therefore, she seeks liberation from oppression. Mabel Ewrierhoma, is of the opinion that:

Nevertheless, whether hemmed in or not, the African woman is not totally dependent on the man. She engages among other affairs, in economic, social and political responsibilities that grant her some degree of independence. A woman like this in this context may assert her will in refusing to allow socio-psychological limitations to enmesh her" (Ewrierhoma 16).

In a similar vein, Oluwakemi and Daniel say that "One of the reasons some women strive to be better persons on their own and why they make the choices they make in marriage is to regain their self-worth that the patriarchal society has deprived them" (Oluwakemi and Daniel 15).

Mrs Lawson, Omolewa's mother does not see any reason, why her daughter decides to remain unmarried. She expresses concern over her daughter's unmarried status despite her achievements. The play delves into the hurdles faced by unmarried women within a patriarchal societal framework. Omolewa continually faces societal pressure regarding the significance of marriage, with even her own mother admonishing her. In a poignant moment during Movement 6,

her mother's reprimand cuts deep as she passionately articulates her frustrations. "Yes, work, work, work. All you know and think about is work. No man in your life, you hardly think about it and that is even if you are thinking about it (55).

The distress that comes with being a 35-year-old single woman in a patriarchal society is vividly depicted here. Olu Dolapo highlights that as far as culture is concerned, unmarried women are unfulfilled women are perceived as lacking fulfillment until they attain a specific marital status, signifying completeness. This notion is exemplified by Omolewa's mother when she candidly expresses:

MRS LAWSON: I will, I will ooo, but listen my dear (she relaxes in a sober mood) Every woman is born to fulfil a purpose, every woman who is a mother wants to see her daughter get married, have children and be a responsible woman in the society; They should be able to contribute their own quota to the upkeep of the house these days (25).

This resonates with Osita Ezenwanebe's view when says that Marriage in Nigeria is seen as one of the hallmarks of a complete woman. While this attitude may be considered as indicative of strong family ties, it nonetheless betrays the state of women as wives and the level of power at their disposal. Wives occupy the private, family life and engage in domestic labour while the public sphere of men affords them limitless exercise of power. (268)

In a similar vein, Irene Salami says that in a patriarchal society "a woman's importance revolves around her child bearing role. In African tradition, only motherhood confirms the gender identity of a woman, granting her cultural legitimacy. These are parameters defined by patriarchal ideology, which women have learnt to live with for their personal survival" (Salami 97).

Despite her economic empowerment, Omolewa is portrayed as an unfulfilled woman due to the fact that she does not have a husband. Mrs. Lawson begins to doubt her daughter's womanhood as she

tearfully laments to her husband "a lady of her caliber ought to have someone in her life" (24).

Here, Mrs. Lawson emphasizes the significance of marriage and its role in determining the respect given to women. She firmly believes that a woman's worth lies in her ability to marry and have children. Mrs. Lawson leaves no room for ambiguity as she directly informs Omolewa that a woman's identity is validated only through her role as a wife or mother; otherwise, she is deemed unfit to be counted among women. This sentiment echoes the concerns expressed by numerous African women and scholars such as Ezeigbo and Ezenwanebe, who lament the prevalent practice among contemporary Nigerian women of willingly discarding their names upon marriage. According to Ezenwanebe "Gender relations between husband and wife are unequal. Women as wives lose their personal identity and assume the names associated with their social roles as wives and mothers; for example, "Nwunye John", that is, "John's wife" or "Mama Ada", that is, "Ada's mother", and that opens the door to further powerlessness and oppression" (Ezenwanebe 268).

Despite her daughter's achievements, Mrs. Lawson's makes life uncomfortable for Omolewa leaving her feeling utterly incomplete and emotionally distressed. Omolewa is portrayed as a hard-working woman and well respected by Alhaja:

LEWA: I am just a lady, not different from others

ALHAJA: (Romantically) No, my Omolewa, don't be flattered, celebrate yourself. At times,

I imagine how lucky I am to have you (10)

Alhaji respects Omolewa because she's a hardworking woman. She has successfully overcome the challenges and obstacles posed by the patriarchal society. He sees Omolewa's ability to survive in a male-dominated space as highly commendable. Omolewa is the kind of lady that knows where to draw the line between business and pleasure. She is a career oriented woman. No wonder, Medina, her househelp says "Na wa oo. This aunty sef no dey rest" (14). In other words,

she gains Alhaji's respect, because she is not like any other woman. She is intelligent, smart, educated and self-sufficient.

Omolewa really wants to get married but she contends that patriarchal norms reinforce gender stereotypes, perpetuating women's oppression. She firmly refuses to give up her autonomy in the name of marriage. She is suspicious that Alhaji wants to use marriage as a means to oppress and suppress her. She says, "...the day I enter his house as a wife that will be the last day he sees my career" (36), indicating her unwillingness to sacrifice her ambitions. On another occasion, Omolewa says:

As I have always said...I will repeat it again...I need my freedom friend. I see marriage as a form of self-slavery. Selling myself into a life of bondage. Whereby I can't think on my own. I will be forced to change my identity, my name. They tell you how to dress, speak and interact. Instruct you when and where to talk. You no longer have the jolly jolly self. You become a doomed cook. Life becomes limited to the domestic domain. Children become your identity. You will only be seen from your husband's perspectives. And then, thank your stars if you do not have the modern machines to wash, cook, iron, that can ease your work loads. Then, you will know you are doomed (35-36).

Omolewa's choice to remain unmarried is due to the patriarchal nature of the marriage institution - the family, which she sees as the foundation of women's oppression. Through the lens of Olu' Dolapo's play, the travail of women within the family serve as evidence of the arbitrary nature of gender roles, which are both shaped by and shape marriage. For instance, the story of Farouk's wife, who must not speak in the public without her husband's consent is a pointer to the physical manifestation of male dominance and female subjugation within the family. While the play implicitly condemns male egoism, it also hints at a hopeful prospect for women's future, as articulated by Omolewa. She astutely observes that as long as marriages remain unequal, they

will never serve as sources of fulfillment for women, regardless of their social class.

This realization prompts Omolewa to reject marriage institution as it upholds and validates these roles, opting instead to lead a life outside its confines. Notably, Omolewa is very much aware of societal expectations and refuses to be pushed around. Oluwakemi and David say that:

Omolewa is independent of any man because she has all it takes to live happily. But altogether, she cannot do without him for reasons such as to ease stress, to satisfy herself sexually need, for emotional fulfillment and for companionship in the social world and also for a partial completion or complement to her incompleteness. No single human can be entirely complete in herself. In this regard, the idea that women can do without a man may be considered fallacy (49)

By forming a deliberate partnership with Alhaji, Omolewa debunks the idea of seeing marriage as the only way for organizing sexual and social relationships. In the play, the traditional idealization of marriage gives way to a newfound emphasis on individual self-worth, acknowledging that women, regardless of marital status, should have the freedom and liberty to define and actualize themselves beyond the confines of wifehood. Olu' Dolapo's uses her play to condemn the arbitrary nature of gender roles, suggesting that their stability is not inherent but rather subject to scrutiny. Consequently, marriage itself, which provides the context for the enactment of these roles, becomes a subject of questioning and reevaluation. This perspective is echoed in the sentiments expressed by Eliza:

ELIZA: Then you get it all wrong. Not every woman wants a man anymore. Some of us want to be mothers without the tag of being called a wife. Some of us want to be career motivated rather than family tied down. Some of us want to be in the public domain instead of taking care of a man's needs that might not even be appreciated. And also, some of us just want to be us (41).

Omolewa's choice to defy societal norms by becoming pregnant for Alhaji and opting to raise

the child outside of wedlock does not go down well with Mrs. Lawson. As it is expected, Mrs. Lawson kicks vehemently against Omolewa's rejection of marriage as seen in the conversation with her husband, expressing a contrasting viewpoint:

MR. LAWSON: Please, madam; Let us have some peace after my retirement.

MRS. LAWSON: Every mother wants to see her grandchildren

MR. LAWSON: And if they don't?

MRS. LAWSON: You think that way, because you are a man. Do you want people to see me as a failed mother? (52).

In *Omolewa*, Olu' Dolapo portrays marriage as a framework for regulating sexual relations and family dynamics. She sees marriage as a metaphor of confinement which promotes the restrictions of physical space, emotional isolation, and cultural constraints. The married female characters in her play, *With or Without*, lack supportive environments where they can openly discuss their struggles. Gender roles, delineating duties and behaviors based on perceived sexual distinctions, are deeply intertwined with the institution of marriage, each shaping and reinforcing the other. These roles are ingrained in individuals through a process of cultural assimilation, priming them for the various life transitions, with marriage being arguably the most significant. Within marriage, these roles find validation and full expression, serving as markers of social status as husbands and wives fulfill societal expectations placed upon them.

The institution of marriage has garnered significant attention in works like Osita Ezenwanebe's *Adaugo*, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House*, Irene Salami's *Sweet Revenge* amongst others. Feminist scholars have consistently highlighted marriage as a battleground for intense gender conflicts. Regardless of their specific feminist perspectives, African women playwrights have continually delved into the complexities and challenges faced

by women within the institution of marriage. Emeka Aniagor says that conflicts in the family are "generated by clash of modern and tradocultural ideologies" (Aniagor 388). Chukuma Helen claims that "[m]odern African women's works do not show the romantic aspects of marriage. They rather portray the stresses and problems aimed at sensitizing women to the harsh reality" (Chukuma 82). Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh explores how marriage can simultaneously define and depersonalize women in *Nneora: An African Doll's House*. Mariama Bâ, in *So Long a Letter*, vividly portrays the agonizing experiences of abandoned wives. The consistent focus on marriage in African women's literature underscores its significance as a pivotal arena for gender relations and the inevitable conflicts that ensue. Harry Olufunwa articulates this perspective, stating that marriage serves as a complex arena where biology and gender dynamics intertwine. Olufunwa says that "If men and women are intended to come together in a marital relationship, the rules under which they may do so are often more arbitrary than natural; it is here that the essential co-equality of marriage is transmuted into its opposite, that of dominance and subordination" (Olufunwa 3). Marriage, he argues, both upholds and challenges patriarchy, being rooted in the biological distinctiveness and complementarity of men and women. This complementary aspect underscores the interdependence of the sexes, where neither can fulfill the role of procreation without the other. Consequently, marriage stands as a unique social institution where men rely on women just as much as women rely on men, biologically speaking. This reality, however, often sparks crises within societies and gives rise to cultural norms that emerge from the biological fundamentals of marriage, countering its potential as a great equalizer.

Conclusion:

The creative works of these African female playwrights have shown that the advent of new breed of African women, women who emerged after the independences and who are very

different from those depicted in most the plays of most African male writers. If the female characters of the majority of African male writers are silent or not often heard and are not included in decision making, in the selected plays chosen for this study, they are prominent. The female characters speak freely and resist men physically. Omolewa refuses to marry Alhaji despite the fact that she is pregnant for him. These African female writers have also demonstrated in their plays that a woman can be happy, fulfilled outside marriage. They have proved wrong the belief that a married woman is happier and luckier than a single one. In Akayi's play. *Mary, When will You Marry*, the lead female character, Mary is filled with happiness, yet she does not have a husband. Her happiness stems, on one hand, from her economic independence which has given her a very good living conditions and enabled her to live the kind of life that she wants. On the other hand, Omolewa's happiness results from the fact that she is heavy with a child, escaping the misfortune which barrenness constitutes for a woman in her society. Therefore, with economic independence and children, a woman can be happy outside marriage.

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