



Tradition and Modernity: A Binary reading of Tess Onwueme's the Broken Calabash

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Abstract

The issue of culture, tradition, and its unassailable conflict with modernity in certain parts of Africa, as obvious in several communities in Nigeria, is a challenge that affects our social development today. As it is often echoed; "it's a man's world", most times women fall victim of these long-held traditions that have over time become canons we hold dear. The glib dispositions of these practices situate patriarchy at the epicenter of societal construction and places women on us, the fringes, mostly becoming unwilling casualties of unfriendly traditions. Thus, this paper examines how tradition and its attendant problems impede on the social standing and general development of the woman in society using Tess Osonye Onwueme's play 'The Broken Calabash'. Using the thematic content analysis approach the paper explored the potential conflict between tradition and modernity, the paper interrogates Broken Calabash as a reflection of women's subjugation by obsolete cultural traditions, presenting alongside this, the consequences of social exclusion and the denial of rights experienced by women. The paper concludes that the dramatic experience presented by Tess Osonye Onwueme reveals the intricate relations between tradition and modernity as a potent means for the reading and understanding of texts depicting gender relations.

Keywords: *tradition, modernity, binarity, woman, discourse analysis.*

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INTRODUCTION

The interplay between tradition and modernity has been a recurring theme in the works of most African writers with feminist leanings and bias for women issues. This strange alliance has over the years presented a subtle platform for writers to interrogate the somewhat dehumanizing experiences of women; manifesting in harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, gender-based violence, women subjugation and seclusion amongst others. This paper therefore presents a fresh perspective to the reading of Tess Onwueme's *Broken Calabash*; exploring the binary relations of tradition and modernity as a gateway to understanding the concerns of women in Nigeria and indeed Africa in general.

Background

Oftentimes African playwrights have situated the discourse of feminism and struggle for women liberation within the binary presentations of tradition versus modernity in an attempt to affirm the centrality of tradition as a critical force in the continuous subjugation of women in society. As such the tradition versus modernity discourse becomes conceived on a pedestal of two distinct opposites in functionality and intent. While tradition represents all that is bad, awful, and terrible and stands against the aspirations of women, modernity represents the total liberation of women from stringent parochial practices and beliefs; the freedom of women to decide and fulfil their own aspirations without cultural restrictions.

It becomes pertinent to note that cultural representations are crucial in the establishment of modern notions. Women are often projected as cultural emblems of the society. Changes in her attire and demeanour are therefore hastily condemned as threats to culture and tradition. Such responses have been witnessed in many parts of the world and at one level can be read as a response typical of patriarchal societies. At another level this essentially patriarchal response has to be conjoined with the specific historical experience of colonial societies. Changes to tradition had to be condemned on two grounds—one, that they ran counter to natural patriarchal norms and two, that they are alien and western (Chaudhuri 2015:277).

Similarly, Fwangyil (2012) contends that the repression of women in society today is a product of several years of patriarchal dominance which are established in tradition. She reports that:

Women are subjected to male oppression and suppression at various stages of life. Unfortunately, female oppression is deeply ingrained in the culture of the societies which ensures the continuation of patriarchal control. This situation makes it impossible for women to seek ways of liberating themselves because doing so will be tantamount to challenging the age long tradition and customs of the people. (Fwangyil 2012:15)

As such, the treatment of women issues as well as the quest for women liberation is undeniably cast within the struggle against the other. For it is this 'self and other' relationship that the concerns of playwrights with bias for women issues find impetus. The constant juxtaposition of tradition and modernity as amplified by the binarity of good/bad, male/female and masculine/feminine woven into dramatic situations provide clarity to the articulation of women issues. The distinction between these two (tradition and modernity) invariably presents a nexus for understanding the depiction of women in the works of dramatists. Tess Onwueme in *The Broken Calabash*, operating within this framework raises critical questions regarding the challenges of indigenous African traditions to the development of women in contemporary African society.

Conceptual Framework

Lévi-Strauss, considered to be the father of anthropology, triggered the discourse on binary oppositions. He believes that the significance of any socio-cultural issue lies in its originality. He asserts that through the comparative and contrastive filters, the right evaluation of any phenomenon can be justly possible. He reports that differences are extremely fecund. It is only through difference that progress has been made. What threatens us right now is probably what we may call over communication that is, the tendency to know exactly in one point of the world what is going on in all other parts of the world. In order for a culture to be really itself and to produce something, the culture and its members must be convinced of their originality and even, to some extent, of their superiority over the others; it is only under conditions of under communication that it can produce anything. We are

now threatened with the prospect of our being only consumers, able to consume anything from any point in the world and from every culture, but of losing all originality.

Binary opposition is a term introduced in the world of structuralism. The structuralists believe that a just judgment of any social issue is simply possible through the analysis of the pair differences (Noorbakhsh, 2013: 3906). The establishment of this underlying phonological system of 'distinctive features' achieves an ultimate segmentation of a language's sound-system, and lends a new rigor and weight to Structuralism's dependence on pairs of opposed terms, already adumbrated by Saussure. 'The oppositions of such differential qualities are real binary oppositions as defined in logic, i.e., they are such that each of the terms of the opposition necessarily implies its opposite' (Noorbakhsh, 2013).

Discourses on women issues have inadvertently been placed on this pedestal. An invocation of modernity as against tradition gives credence to the interrogation of the concerns of women especially in Africa. Tradition is usually seen as the opposite to modernity (Graburn 2001:8), and it is not erroneous to find that in articulating the problems of women especially in Africa, they are considered to be deeply rooted in cultural practices and beliefs. Maluleke (2012:2) clearly puts this in perspective by nothing that:

Traditional cultural practices reflect the values and beliefs held by members of a community for periods often spanning generations. Every social grouping in the world has specific traditional cultural practices and beliefs, some of which are beneficial to all members, while others have become harmful to a specific group, such as women.

Tradition or culture and religion have dictated men and women relationship for centuries and entrenched male domination into the structure of social organization and institution at all levels of leadership. Patriarchy justifies the marginalization of women in education, economy, labor market, politics, business, family, domestic matters and inheritance. Also, this culture of patriarchy is a very strong determinant of male dominance over female and as a result, men will sit back in the family to keep the family name and lineage growing while women will be married out. The claim by most feminist that men are traditionally being trained for leadership activities while women are confined to domestic activities; roles ascribed to them by culture is worthy of consideration. Patriarchal societies propagate the

ideology of motherhood which restricts women's mobility and burdens them with the responsibilities to nurture and rear children. The biological factor to bear children is linked to the social position of women's responsibilities of motherhood: nurturing, educating and raising children by devoting themselves to family. Makama (2013:116) argues that:

The patriarchal society sets the parameters for women's structurally unequal position in families and markets by condoning gender-differential terms in inheritance rights and legal adulthood, by tacitly condoning domestic and sexual violence and sanctioning differential wages for equal or comparable work.

Thus, patriarchal constructions of social practices are legitimized by traditional institutions as most traditional practices regard male authority as superior and the laws and norms regarding family, marriage, divorce, and inheritance are linked to patriarchal control over property biased against women. A person's legal identity with regard to marriage, divorce and inheritance are determined by his or her tradition, which has laid down duties for men and women and their relationship. Most traditions endorse patriarchal values and all major traditional practices have been interpreted and controlled by men of upper caste and class. The imposition of *parda*, restrictions on leaving the domestic space, separation between public and private are all gender specific and men are not subjected to similar constraints. Thus, the mobility of women is controlled. They have no right to decide whether they want to be mothers, when they want to be, the number of children they want to have, whether they can use contraception or terminate a pregnancy and so on and so forth.

Consequently, the major concern of the modern woman lies in quest for freedom, freedom to decide her own fate and be accorded the necessary respect as a human being with aspirations, capable of setting and reaching goals of life. Modernity therefore refers to anything that is modern. It implicates the involvement

of women in society beyond the home, the fights for voting rights by women and quest for equity in decision making processes in society. Hooper (2012:475) avers that for this to happen we need to:

Demolish the existing impersonal culture map that has reproduced and glamorized the masculinity and so-called rationality as something the only real and true. Remove the power structure that controls diverse knowledge systems. The current power hierarchy exists with the systematically created dualist ontology that has been responsible for the growing epistemic ide. Empower the people themselves through their own organization, activism, and resistance.

Similarly, Philips (2018:4) reports that forage into the realm of modernity might sometime be met with ambiguities. He argues that:

Maneuvering around the terrain of modernity has posed difficult political challenges to feminists, for in a context where modernity gets attached to sexual freedom and gender equality, and arguments for sexual freedom and gender equality become overlaid with hierarchies of country and culture, mobilization against oppressive practices risks co-option for very different ends.

Perhaps one can aver that the premise upon which Africa feminist have approached the struggle for liberation finds expression in their understanding of the demands of modernity. Championed by Iconic writers like Tess Onwueme, the domestication of the global concerns of women have been given manifestation in the concept of womanism.

This concept results from an interrogation of feminism to reflect the cultural codes of our African society. As such African Womanism according to Obadiagu (2008) acknowledges the cultural and spiritual experiences of women, it also reflects on the traditional background of women. Gbilekaa (2013:17) anchors this properly by stating that African Womanism demands female African autonomy and cooperation. It examines issues like the centrality of children in marriage and challenges traditional values and institutions that oppress the African woman. It also questions the principle which places more value on sons than daughters. Although it has been argued that African womanist are preservers of culture (Banjo 2018:48), it must also be stated that the value they place on life supersedes every

other concern. The value for life encapsulates their essence; the love for men, love for children, desire to be mothers and freedom of belief without prejudice. This perhaps is critical to the discourse of women issues and the way they are reflected in modern day literature/ play texts such as *the Broken Calabah*.

Synopsis of the Play

Tess Onwueme in *The Broken Calabash* examines the subjects of tradition and modernity. Ona, the daughter of Courtuma is an only child and an Idegbe (what is otherwise known as a male-daughter). As the only child and by tradition a male-daughter, Ona is expected to take up the responsibility of sustaining the family name. Her purpose according to tradition is to ensure that she bears children for her father or marry a wife who will bear children for her father and ensure the continuation of the bloodline. Ona however, finds this tradition strange and a violation of her essence and existence. Her exposure to western education encapsulated in the freedom of will, is in sharp contrast with the precepts of tradition and cultural system which she is confronted with in her home. She falls in love with Diaku who happens to be an "Osu" (a term used to describe an outcast in the Igbo tradition), but she is denied the opportunity to actualise her desires by her father's (Courtuma) stern insistence on the observance of tradition; which stipulates that she must ensure the continuity of their bloodline. The predicament surrounding Ona pushes Diaku away and he ends up marrying Ugo, Ona's best friend and school mate. The frustration and pain resulting from marriage between Diaku and Ugo propels Ona into an action which leads her entire family to their precipice.

METHODS

This research adopts the discourse analysis approach. Tess Onwueme's play *The Broken Calabash* serves as the primary text subjected to analysis using the structuralist postulations of binary oppositions. Consequently, the research relies on thematic content analysis to critically analyze the binary manifestations and interplay between tradition and modernity in Tess Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*. Data was drawn from key Characters, actions, dialogues and scenarios within the text and analysed within the framework of the binarity inherent in the relations between tradition and modernity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Locating the discourse of Tradition and Modernity in *The Broken Calabash* through a binary lens

Looking at the word's tradition and culture at a glance, they instantly take us back to such words like nativity and heritage. Graburn (2001:6) states that "tradition was the name given to those cultural features which, in situations of change, were to be continued to be handed on, thought about, preserved and not lost". Therefore, tradition is actually a vital part of a people's heritage that reminds them of their nativity. Culture on the other hand "in the broadest sense is a form of highly participatory activity, in which people create their societies and identities. Culture shapes individuals, drawing out and cultivating their potentialities and capacities for speech, action, and creativity" (Kellner 2006:13). Considering both statements quoted above, Onwueme rightly represents the Igbo culture and tradition in its true picture, projecting a people that have grown to know certain rites as part of their lives and trying to pass them unto the next generation, but in doing this, we discover that the advent of modernity which seems to be seen as the adversary of tradition, stands in the way of Courtuma and his entire family, hindering him from upholding a long-held tradition.

Onwueme borrows from the Igbo tradition of the Ogwashi Uku clan of Delta State to showcase the negative impact of some cultural practices on women. This practice demands that an only daughter and child of a marriage is not permitted to married out, but to remain at home to propagate the lineage of her father, by taking up the gender role of a male child. Ona puts forward her frustration regarding the

intersections between tradition and modernity in a discussion with her father Courtuma:

- Ona : Papa but I thought you like modernization?
- Courtuma : Yes, I do. But not when you fry your hair to look like a rat that has fallen into oil. The beauty of plaited hair is indisputable to any man with nerves and veins inside him.
- Ona : Plaiting my hair? I can remember when I last did that. It is obsolete! To plait my hair and look like an Ekpo mask? What we need now is to disentangle some of the areas that make things too rigid and unmanageable. We must apply heat or relaxer to straighten them in our days (23).
- Courtuma : By the time your hair becomes straight, we would have long been gone.
- Ona : But at least you would have seen the beginning of the drama before your departure.

Ona's subtle rejection of her father's obvious archaic manner of thinking exposes her hidden frustration over the constantly limiting influence of tradition as signified by the overbearing presence of Courtuma in her life. She earlier makes reference to this in her conversation with Ugo when she proclaims that "My father inhibits me in every way" (12). Unbeknownst to Courtuma, Ona's response above hints at a rebellion, a weeding away of the practices which inadvertently have been setting her back. To her, tradition has made life too rigid and unmanageable and therefore, a drastic measure needs to be taken to change the anomalies which harmful traditional practices permit.

The Osu caste system as another overwhelming theme within which the condescending influence of tradition is presented in *The Broken calabash*. According to Amobi (2010:56), individuals within the Osu caste system in the Igbo socio-political sphere are often described as people who are "good for nothing", a proclamation which is prejudicial and hostile. Thus, one can aver that tradition also helps to propagate oppression and domination. The Osu and Idegbe traditional practice invariably reveals Intra-clan power relations of dominance and oppression; a situation where one group claims superiority over another displaying outright hostility and disdain with backing from deeply rooted folkloric traditions. In ensuring the continuity of society, the transference of tradition from one generation to another render's hostile practices a dominant feature of society. Thus, it

inadvertently becomes a tool for the enslavement of those at the base of society. The Osu and Idegbe tradition practices as reflected by Tess Onwueme captures the unassailable consequence of those at the receiving end of oppressive traditions.

Graburn, (2001:6) provides an explanation for the overwhelming influence of tradition on society by describing its intrinsic nature:

Tradition, is "something handed over," is the means of making a living and the symbols, stories, and memories which give one both identity and status. So we can say that even in situations where society has stayed almost the same from generation to generation, "tradition," or whatever people of that society might have called it in their own language, was something pretty central or important.

This is why Courtuma's concern is with the continuation of his lineage and fortunately for him he had tradition on his side to invoke in order to help him maintain his dignity as a man in the community. Courtuma personifies the arguments on patriarchy 'as an unjust social system that is oppressive to women' (Makama 2013:117). In trying to uphold tradition by keeping his daughter as an Idegbe, Courtuma reminds his wife Oliaku of the need to gradually begin to conscientize Ona about her role in the family:

Courtuma : Enough of that now lest we count our chicks before they hatched. Now, seriously, you must from now try to impress it upon Ona that she must begin to have in mind the wife we must marry for her.

Oliaku : Oh! Is that what you were referring to? You should have pronounced it outright, because there's nothing secret about it. Everyone from Aniocha, not to talk of Ogwashi-uku, knows that a girl as only child must either be kept at home as Idegbe to bear children for her father or marry a wife to propagate that line.

Courtuma : Hmm, Oliaku. We must be cautious. Life is no longer as simple as that, Times are changing, and we must not pretend as if the harmattan wind cannot char our skin. Ona has acquired the white man's knowledge and wisdom which is good for us in many respects. But at times our customs are too entrenched, too old to bend or be married to the new ways. What we achieve by sending Ona to school at all is... that we may not die wanting and longing to enter a car owned by other people's children who know and who can tap the tree of the white man's wealth (21).

The above conversation also reveals the fundamental flaw of Courtuma's character. He is insistent on keeping the Idegbe tradition because it favours him. He realizes the need to send Ona to school to learn the wisdom of the white man's wisdom but is weary of the implications of this. He welcomes the potential benefits of the knowledge she will acquire to benefit the family but rejects the possibility of Ona defying/forgetting her role as stipulated by tradition. Courtuma like many men today in society have hidden behind the saying that: 'a man's culture is his identity' to perpetuate acts of injustice on women in the name of identifying with their culture (Uchem & Ngwa 2014:145). This is not unconnected to the idea that as the head of the home, the man is an embodiment of tradition and represents all the values of society. Consequently, his actions reflect the social and ideological construct which considers men (who are the patriarchs) as superior to women.

Binarity, tradition and modernity and women oppression in The Broken Calabash

Within the tradition and modernity inter-relation lies the subtle inclination towards change, an idea that is somewhat antithetical to beliefs of strong postulates of tradition. Modernity by its excessive connotations implicates change. Change from the over bearing influence of tradition on society, change from the domineering control of men over women and freedom from "a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 1990:56).

Ona's predicament leads her to revolt against her father. In a confrontation with her parents, she reveals her desire to be free from the mental slavery and subjugation being exerted on her:

- Ona : Noboday has cast a spell on me. If anything, it is your own spell. For once father and mother, I must lest you understand this, the fact that you gave me life does not mean you must control it. Did you not choose each other for marriage?
- Oliaku : Ona, you really amuse me, my parents gave me to your father as wife. I didn't have to choose him. But you have a choice. I didn't even know him. He used to come to my father times to help him in the farm. I thought they were friends. Then one day I was told that they had come to pay my dowry. But Ona yours is different you have a choice.
- Ona : Between my father and who?
- Oliaku : No God forbid. Not between your father and anybody. But a choice to bear children for your father alone, or marry a wife who can help bear children to multiply the stock.
- Ona : I see, you people have a very ambitious murder plan. You will not only slaughter me on the altar of your decadent tradition, but would also want another female head. I say to hell with your tradition. Homestead! Roots! All! Let the wind blow! Let the shaky homestead be blown. Anything that cannot stand the force of change must be uprooted or be blown into oblivion by the storm heralding the new season!
- Courtuma : Ona.. you don't understand.
- Ona : and is that why you must tear me apart? If your sole aim is to make me remain at home and breed children for you, why did you chase Diaku away? Or must I also not love whoever must give me those children? (50-51)

The confrontation between tradition and modernity is evident in the above conversation. As a product of western education Ona's enlightenment has empowered her with the ability to think and rationalize situations logically. She questions the validity of an obsolete tradition which only seeks to dehumanize her.

The Ona's plight exemplifies the situation being faced by many women in Nigeria today. Uchem & Ngwa (2014) note that:

In some parts of the south east Nigeria women up to this day are often exposed to harmful and obnoxious cultural practices after the death of their spouse; ranging from ritual confinement, restriction of movement, deprivation of family property to expulsion from the family home. For instance, some widows are obliged to confine themselves in a dark room for a number of days as a way of mourning their husbands. In situations where the widow is suspected to be responsible for the death, she is sent to spend ten to fifteen days and nights in a forest where she is expected to shave her hair and be exposed to dangerous animals, mosquitoes and even sometimes beaten by rain; all in an attempt to prove her innocence. (145)

There is no doubt that the traditional restrictions prescribed on women in many communities are of enormous impact. The obvious contradiction here is that Ona's affiliation with western education is meant to liberate and grant her the freedom of choice to take decisions about her life but tradition stands as an obstacle to that freedom. For Ona, the 'Idegbe' tradition was a restriction intended to keep her secluded in her father's house for the sole purpose of bearing children for him. Again, we see the Idegbe tradition reinforcing the stereotype of women as domestic beings whose responsibilities are limited to procreation. Ona's objection to this cruel tradition stems ultimately from her inability to express her love for Diaku. As Banjo (2018:48) observes, the modern woman prides herself for being a lover of

men and equally being a lover of her femininity. Having lost her identity as a woman as well as the capacity to express her love for the one person her heart desires, Ona decides to challenge tradition in a most daring manner when she reveals that she is pregnant.

- All : What? Who is responsible? Who is the man? (silence)
- Dibia : Tell us, Ona, your life is in danger.
- Courtuma : Speak, speak, my jewel! We will not be angry with you, whoever is responsible. You know that's the heart's desire of your father; to have a grandchild by his Ona. Ona, do you fear I might be angry with you? No! Ona, my jewel. For the boundless joy is mine. I, Elope, Courtuma, a grandfather to my Ona's children.
- Ona : You, my father, are the cause.
- Courtuma : What?
- Ona : Yes, you are the cause....
- Oliaku : Abomination! Obida Obu Ogweh! The land forbids! God forbids! Isah come! Come! Come and hear!
- Courtuma : Ona! Ona! Please! Whatever you want. Whatever you ask. I will do it. I must ... for you. Name another man. For God's sake, please! Ona, please! My life, Ona. My life is in your hands. Please save my ebbing life, Ona. Please, say it is Diaku. Let me fetch you Diaku. Diaku will marry you. I'll let Diaku marry you. Now! Now!
- Ona : Diaku has married ugo.
- Courtuma : Then Ona name another man. Ona, why must you strangle me, I who loved you so?
- Ona : Your love has landed me where I am.
- Courtuma : Ona, it is not me. But who will believe me? Ona, I am your father. Remember the homestead. Ona! The roots, Ona!
- Ona : That I remember. And that is why you are the father of my child. You asked for it. And you got it. (57)

Having lost her love and lost her humanity Ona becomes enraged caring less about the magnitude of the consequences of her actions. She names Courtuma as the father of her child, an abomination which puts a serious dent on the tradition which he so previously sought to uphold. Realizing he is in a fix Courtuma pleads for Ona to mention any other name apart from he's but Ona remains resolute on her position. She is determined to end this brutal tradition which is unfair to the feelings and aspirations of women, a tradition which preys on the frailties of women in society. Ona's determination to challenge tradition affirms the ever-influential

position of modernity as a changing force. She believes that Tradition and Modernity are two strong forces that are flexible and must help liberate society from the inhumanity of one group on another.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that certain traditional practices have a beneficial role to play in society. However, when traditional practices begin turn into mitigating forces for the discrimination of women in society, then such a tradition needs to be interrogated. Every human being has the right to make a choice about his/her own life in the society; it is a basic requirement for human existence. Tess Onwueme in *The Broken Calabash* brings to light the dehumanizing and negative impact of some traditional practices on women in the Nigerian society. Her dramatic interrogation of the "Idgebe" traditional practice contributes to the ongoing discuss on culture and its role in women subjugation. While traditions are critical to the continuity and harmony of society, it is imperative to note that certain practices propagate women subjugation. Hence, there is a need for the re-evaluation of traditional practices in society especially as it affects women. The intrinsic patriarchal dominance that backs the foundation of traditional institutions need to be re-evaluated to make way for a more inclusive system which respects the humanity of women in society. Women must be recognized as having desires and aspirations. The frivolous vacuity ascribed to women must be denounced expressively. Thus, readers and dramatists alike need to deploy the binary approach to the reading of texts in order to fully grasp and understand the meanings embedded in texts.

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