Radical Feminism and the Nigerian Fiction: The Perspective of Odafe Atogun *in Wake Me When I'm Gone*

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Abstract

Marxism as a tool of scholarly conversation is frequently used by literary critics globally. The principles of the Marxist political philosophy that highlights the oppression and unequal relationships that exist in human societies have been found useful by literary scholars in the analyses of the cultural and traditional oppressiveness prevalent in fictional environments of Nigerian novels. The Nigerian society is full of antagonistic innuendos about the female-hood. Some Nigerian novelists reflect these characteristics. A writer like Odafe Atogun in *Wake Me When I'm Gone* showcases a female protagonist, Ese, who refuses to yield to the draconian cultural laws of her twin societies targeted at widows and orphans. This research paper attempts at discussing the commendable efforts of resistance to tyranny by Ese and the obvious consequences. The radical feminist literary theoretical instrument is used in discussing the activities of this radical feminist protagonist. The conclusion is, that with determination and unalloyed commitment, a female personality can obliterate the evil traditions of her society in collaboration with positively minded men.

Keywords; Radical, Feminism, Nigerian fiction, Marxism Society

Introduction

Odafe Atogun, a Nigerian writer, was born in Lokoja, North Central of Nigeria, but hails from Edo State. He is constantly likened to Franz Kafka, George Orwell and even Amos Tutuola by many critics because of his style of writing. His first novel, *Taduno's Song,* was published in 2016. He lives in Abuja as a full-time writer.

Within the domain of Nigerian fiction, many Nigerian male writers have tagged female characters with derogatory roles in their fictive narratives. The reason for this includes, "the traditional tendency of the Nigerian society to restrict the women to their biological

roles as wives and mothers" (Chuma – Udeh, 208). Thus, womanhood is depicted within the context of subservience and clothed in inferiority. In Festus Iyayi's *Violence* for instance, Adisa enjoys the uncomplimentary role of being an adulterous wife. In *Heroes*, same Iyayi, subjects one of the two visible female characters, Ndudi, to the usual female dehumanization of being raped by soldiers of both sides of the conflict in the Nigerian – Biafran civil war. Other male writers like; Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi and Chukwuemeka Ike amongst many, have painted female characters in togas of shame. Surprisingly however, the female Nigerian novelists have not faired better than their male counterparts in this regard. They have subjected the femine protagonists in their fictional works to unmitigated agonies and humiliations. Buchi Emecheta is guilty of this in her novels that include: *Joys of Motherhood*, *Second Class Citizen* and *Head Above Water.* In these prose narratives, she highlights female protagonists in patriarchal societies who are made to suffer from physical and psychological tortures because of cultural practices. Even in Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets*, the brunt of the suffering associated with the Nigeria- Biafra civil war rests on the tender female shoulders of Ginika, who like Ndudi is raped in addition to several unbearable experiences. In Kaine Agary's *Yellow Yellow,* a novel that x-rays the tortuous lifestyles of inhabitants of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, it's the female half caste, Zilayefa, who bears the burden of suffering and abasement because of abject poverty. Economic deprivation occasioned by the devastation of the environment as a result of the activities of foreign oil exploring companies, push the female folks like Zilayefa into prostitution.

In addition to the enormous attention showered on the female protagonists in the Nigerian fictional literary spaces by Nigerian female writers, some Nigerian female literary critics have devoted considerable efforts in carrying out researches on the broad concept of feminism theory. "The trio of Catherine Acholonu, Molara Ogundipe – Leslie and Mary Modupe Kolawole advance different feminist theories of Motherism, Stiwanism and African Womanism respectively" (Ezeaku, 22). Of recent is the "Snail Sense Feminism" by Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo. Each of these female literary critics succeeds in carving a niche in a phenomenon, so huge and diverse. These home grown feminist theories fail to capture a scenario in which a female central character will radically confront the traditionally obnoxious laws of communities and succeed in positively altering them to accommodate the widows and orphans as in *Wake Me When I'm Gone.* By so doing, this radical protagonist combines her customary "roles as wife and mother (Chukukere 7)" with radicalism.

Over the centuries, radicalism has had its root in the politics of governance. This concept has been generously associated with fundamental changes in the structure of societies. A political philosophy that has been the veritable bulwark of this change is socialism. This is

a political structure where the nation or state has control of the means of production. Linked to this political philosophy is the famous Marxist socialist philosophy of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. These two philosophers see in every human society a class struggle that will ultimately lead to a revolution "in which the workers would overthrow the capitalists, take control of economic production and abolish private property (ownership)" (Dobie, 87). Even though this theory "was not designed to serve as a theory about how to interpret texts "(Dobie, 86), it has been found by literary critics over the decades as a veritable instrument of intellectual literary criticism. Scholars who have found the principles of this theory attractive fashioned out the concept known as the Marxist literary critical approach. George Lukacas of Hungarian origin and the Algerian scholar Louis Althusser have remained foremost Marxist literary critics with Lukacas being the renowned proponent of the 'reflectionist' brand.

Of utmost interest in this paper is the slant of the protagonist in this novel towards radicalism, albeit, a form of feminist radicalism. This is easily discernable from her actions and intentions. Ese is a revolutionary personality whose temperaments are in tandem with the sentiments of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. While she is a champion of the down trodden, the oppressed orphans and widows of her fictive societies, the traditions of her environments in conjunction with the agents of enforcement of the cultural laws, represent the capitalists or bourgeoisie. In a literary criticism of *Wake Me When I'm Gone* therefore, one cannot shy away from the Marxist dialectical interpretation of the actions of the protagonist. It will not be unusual to adopt the Marxist literary critical approach in the analysis of this novel. But due to the peculiar status of Ese as a female revolutionary personality, it is necessary to have a convergence of the feminist and the Marxist literary theories to arrive at the radical feminist literary apparatus that is germane in this critical discourse. It becomes pertinent to explore this novel and its protagonist within the ambit of a radical feminist literary theory.

Radical feminism is a theory that "analysis's the structures of power which oppress the female sex" (radfemcollective.org). This theory enunciates the idea that women as a biological group universally suffer from injustice in the hands of men as a biological group. The adherents of this theory hold the view that "male power is constructed and maintained through institutional and cultural practices that aim to bolster male superiority through the reinforcement of female inferiority". Jone Lewis sees radical feminism as "the social domination of women by men". Major proponents of this kind of activism include: Ti – Grace Alkinson, Phyllis Chester, Mary Daly, Andrea Divorkin and Ellen Willis. Many of these are United States of America based. In Europe however, Alexandra Kollontai and Clara Zetkin were very vocal voices. Ibeku Ijeoma is of the view that radical feminism

within the African literary space is "a radical reaction to dehumanization, humiliation and violence." In her conclusion, she believes that it is series of humiliations that make a female character adopt radical approaches to achieve freedom. Ese in *Wake Me When I'm Gone* responds to the twin evils of dehumanization and mortification and the outcome is her revolutionary behaviours to the traditions of her societies.

A few literally critics have taken time to review the novel *Wake Me When I'm Gone*. For Helon Habila, the writer and literary critic, Atogun "has combined folkoric elements with a strong central character to create a haunting and unusual narrative." Atogun is seen to adopt the traditional African folklore narrative technique in creating the tortous journey of Ese, the protagonist. Habila's view of this novel is that it contains an overflowing "use of tradition and taboo and those who use them to control and exploit the masses". It is obvious that Ese is beloved by the gods. What remains incontrovertible in this fictional work are what Habila describes as "an allegory about the endless contest between good and bad, and how the universe sometimes - but not always - sides with the good against the bad". He concludes that the "puritanical worldview" the author expresses in the novel is one "whose severity is modified by the author's beautiful imagery and evocative language". The novel is also seen as full of "oppression and tragedy, sincerely conveyed, but there is also remarkable triumph, a stunning rebirth and shimmering hope" (amazon.com). Similarly, this novel remains an intriguing and fascinating prose fiction "of curses broken and lives remade, of great tragedy and incredible rebirth" (ouidabooks.com). This second novel of Odafe Atogun, treats bits of diverse themes of "grief, love, motherhood and breaking the rules" (canongate.co.uk). Despite all of the above, this paper is concerned with the author's characterization of a super heroine, who confronts social injustices targeted at the poor widows and orphans and succeeds in destroying them admirably.

Odafe Atogun, in an intriguing prologue begins a storyline that initially reads like a fairy tale. For him, this appropriate formal preface unfolds early in the narrative the onset of melancholy in the life of the protagonist, Ese, who at age twenty four loses her beloved husband, Tanto. Early in her life, she is immersed deep into the lake of misery. Her distress had begun before now. Her parents had preferred her marrying a man of her father's age against her desire to marry the man of her heart. With her "act of disobedience" (Atogun 6), the stage is set for her first act of rebellion. Every act of rebellion has its punishment. For taking this lonely road of disobedience, she is disowned by her parents and Tanto her husband, also suffers from same punishment from his parents. With this, the writer prepares Ese, the deviant, to primordial customs for more defining moments of challenge as the novel progresses.

Ese as a social crusader is certain to face more antagonism from her family and society. For her to have a positive influence in her society, she must be exemplary in conduct. It is this her good conduct that leads to the collapse of economic activities at Main Street Market due to her absence occasioned by grief. Rather than receiving sympathy from the market women and men, she is hated, castigated and becomes "an outcast" (10). With this new image, she stands out in her environment, a dissident. For this reason, the protagonist enjoys the 'privilege' of the entire community assembling to give her traditional instructions on her expected conducts as a widow. This rebeller is informed that "this great meeting was convened by the Chief… to read out the rights and obligations to Ese, who lost her husband months ago"(14-15). This marks the commencement of her tortuous physical and psychological oppression which she must resist at all cost to alter positively the moral equation in her community. But are these rights and obligations tailor made for her? No. These oppressive and obnoxious regulations have remained timeless in this society. The gut of a rebellious individual is required to deracinate them. One of the preposterous articles of this widowhood law of her homestead is that she has to get married six months after the death of her husband or lose the custody of her son Noah, "to his eldest paternal uncle." (15). But this is not the only odious law of this fictional human settlement. Young orphans by communal injunction "are believed to be evil children responsible for their parents deaths" (18). These detestable parts of the culture of this community thus become the anathemas, the nexus of engagement for the protagonist because they are archaic, opprobrious and unjust.

Ese, the revolutionist as in most climes, is offered an extenuating opportunity to dissuade her from her intention to confront these twin evil traditions that are targeted at widows and orphans. To avoid the punishment accruing to her, she has to marry the aged Chief of the community. As expected of her temperament, she refuses to abide by the law and she is pronounced "an outcast" (23) again by the head of the community. This offensive offer and her robust rejection signify the earliest allusion to the unusual hurdle that this amazon will surmount to get to the summit of her achievement. What has made her case abnormal is that no widow has been forced in the community to marry the ruler except the protagonist. Perhaps, the beauty endowed her by God becomes an alibi for the moral burden she faces here. She thus becomes a scapegoat that must be offered for sacrifice to redeem the widows and orphans from communal injustices. Atogun therefore, casts Ese in the mold of heroines of the ancient Greek drama who must encounter tailor made challenges to enable them break barriers and achieve unique feats. But the writer in his kindness, presents her an opportunity to enhance her courage; the household of the chief is cursed and no child adopted by him survives beyond a few years. Thus, he cannot marry

Ese and adopt her son. This becomes her anchor of hope to resist the venom proposition of the tradition of her people. As a mere mortal, not knowing the duty nature has assigned to her, she tries escaping from her community with her son to an unknown destination to avert the punishment of refusing to marry the king. Certainly, this is a momentary display of cowdice.

Suddenly reawakened to the conscious, she summons courage to confront the reality of the moment. This amazon, in a sense of the theatrical, confronts with audacity the communal understanding that affects her as a widow. "I have come to tell you to leave me and my son alone… I'm not going to marry you or anyone else because tradition requires me to do so" (30) she explodes. Naturally, this rebellious individual will encounter moments of failure. She must not falter or lose focus like when arrested while trying to escape from cruel injustice in the hands of the traditional elements. Incarceration becomes one of the punishments for deviants to oppressive rules. Ese remains in a house arrest for her courage in confronting the nefarious custom of her community. Of note is the resolution of the majority in our society to always accept evil rules as the norm. This fictional community is not different. The ordaining people of the land pretend as if the evils Ese is resisting do not exist because they have come to accept them in this environment as normal. Social crusaders are always alone in their quest for positive changes in their societies.

As in revolutionary moments associated with Lenin and others, the propeller usually have co-travellers in his or her struggle. The novelist introduces Kpofe as an active collaborator in the exercise of dislodging the iniquitous practices of this village. With his arrival, the weight of oppression that Ese has carried alone becomes lessened. He thus becomes the elixir she needs to push forward her ambition and get a reprieve that refreshes her hope of achieving success. For her, this "deep breath of freedom" (51) will free her from the burden of early defeat in her struggle. Kpofe, the "man of influence at the palace" (51) has not helped her achieve this victory at no cost. He has always massaged the ego of the chief with "very expensive bottles of imported whisky" (51) during occasional visits to the palace. Every revolutionary endeavour requires such collaboration from a kindred spirit to soften the foot path to victory.

On the other hand, there is a counter alliance equal in proportion between the priests and the ruler ship. This duo put up stiff resistance to prevent the central character from achieving the target of having an egalitarian society in her community. She is thus confronting the spiritual and terrestrial forces at the same time. The chief priest, the head of the spiritual entities not only enjoys the privilege of enforcing the laws of the land as

prescribed by the gods, but he also enjoys the additional authority of judicial procurements as in , " we have found you guilty of refusing to remarry as stipulated by the laws of the land" (44). The punishment for this offence is the loss of the custody of Ese's son "until (she) complies with the law" (44). The chief and his guards have the duties of enforcing draconian laws like this. From this standpoint therefore, it is obvious that there is a synergy of conspiracy between the supernatural and the terrestrial. Excluded from this twin oppressive group, is "the wise men in the land" (62) who as clairvoyants interpret the \dream of the sick chief. These men acting on the Solomonic inclination interpret the sick ruler's dream in tandem with the wish and aspiration of Ese. Their informed interpretation is that the law compelling "widows to remarry or lose custody of their children" (62) should be repelled for the king to return to a state of good health. Perhaps, a power above all, "a great god in heaven" (49) is responsible for this dramatic turn of events. In obeying this superior heavenly being, the priests are now compelled to perform the necessary sacrifices to abolish the laws. Duka captures the victory of Ese succinctly when he says that she is "truly a strong woman… You have succeeded in changing a bad law" (68). Her dissidence has helped eradicate the evil law that poor widows are subjected to in her community. However, her struggle against obnoxious communal laws still remains.

The next phase of her agitation for a society free from oppression approaches a new engagement. The battle to give orphans an environment to enjoy all privileges accruing to them is her next frontier of battle. In her native community, orphans exist at the fringe of dehumanization. They cannot be involved in a football game with their age mates on the sandy soils of their community. But Ese expresses the eternal truth "that one day things will change" (74). To survive in the midst of a hostile community, the orphans imbibe the communal way of life of the ants, which without a leader, run an efficient republic. It's the influence of this exemplary lifestyle on Ese and her son that propels Ese to take a risk, to encourage the friendship between them and her son.

The restive spirit in all rebels encourages them to seek for the happiness of the majority. Her collision with the decadent law of her society on this issue is to make "my son and the poor orphans… find happiness" (75). Encouraging her son to play with them against the norm of the village becomes her first assault at this evil law. "Next time, play with them" (75) she admonishes Noah. With this incitement, she sets her son against the conscience of the community. She is hopeful that they shall triumph. She dares the community and visits the orphans in the company of her son in their abandoned house at the fringe of the village. This is the height of her abominable conduct and sanctions are imminent.

The sudden demise of Noah, the protagonist's son and ally becomes the writer's way of fast tracking her final onslaught against this custom and tradition of her homestead. At this point, Ese, in agony and trauma throws caution to the wind and challenges the priests to "go and tell the gods there is nothing anyone can do to stop me. These boys are my children now. They call me mother and I call them my sons. They will live here in my house" (115). Thus approaches the breaking point. The punishment for her noble action is death by hanging. Ese thus faces the faith of most revolutionists, the capital punishment. Even the Holy Bible records situations similar to this when disciples of Jesus Christ faced similar punishments for propagating principles that were against the traditions of the Jewish people. She stoops to conquer and goes on exile to avert the capital punishment.

In the second section of the central character's assault on injustice, the novelist presents her with similar challenges as in her native community. Even in this new society, a new homestead the writer has carved out for her, Ese's combativeness confronts the orphism realities of the present. Here orphans are treated as evil children and "treated as slaves" (127). The positive imprints of the divine remain visible in her new home. The prophets, not priest, have informed the people of a messiah to come. They have made smooth the rough paths and prepared the minds of the people of the coming of a redeemer, as it were. In their prophecy, they had warmed the fictional character, Mama, not to sell the big house she had inherited from her late husband because it "would be put to its rightful use at the appropriate time." (126). Atogun here introduces an element of the folkloric narrative; a character of unbelievable existence is injected to fill a missing gap.

The central character is however not unaware of the enormity of burden she has to shoulder. Her lamentation, "once again, I had found myself in a village where tradition would pit me against the people and the authorities" (127), exposes aloud her tortuous journey that will lead to the ultimate realization that her destiny lies in being the saviour of the famished and tormented orphans wherever she finds herself. She is trending on a foot path she perhaps has no control over. But Ese must be willing to contend with a people that are not in a hurry to do away with their tradition, a people that "are averse to change." (128). The reading audience gets the impression that all her experiences before now have been preparations for the main confrontation in the novel. Her sordid experiences in her village of birth seem a rehearsal by Atogun to toughen and steaden her nerves for the ultimate victory ahead. At this point in her self-realization, she acknowledges, "that I had been chosen for a mission" (128). In her present psychological domain, she is approaching the top of the cliff of anxiety. Unlike a tragic hero in a piece of drama that gets to this point and begins to experience an unmitigated fall, Ese remains at the top till the end of this

prose fiction. She cruises from one moment of ecstasy to another while savoring the rewards accruing to her in addition to accompanying psychological bruises.

Like in her earlier struggle to free widows from oppressive communal doctrines, she comes across allies in her present rough pathway. In her present fixation to locate an ally to help her in this destined assignment, the young chief of her new home presents her an olive branch. In the opinion of the young chief "when the people truly want change and they get the backing of the chief, the priest become powerless."(129). Here, the onus rests on the people to demand for change as in civilized democracies. Even with the enormous power wielded by the priest, the collaborative effort of the common people and the support of a benevolent ruler, will water down their influence. In a reassuring move, the young ruler promises, "I will conspire with you to promote the changes you want to see, and you will get my support and together we can ensure that orphans get the good care they deserve" (129). She thus disobeys the gods with his tacit support. In this community, the punishment for the crime Ese commits is blindness, madness and death. For this same offence in her native land, the punishment is death by hanging. After eight days, she has neither lost her sight, become insane or died. As two bulls cannot drink water from the same trough simultaneously, "the next day the priests gathered their families and left the village quietly, paving the way for a new dawn" (193). A new dawn that ushers in respect for the fundamental human rights of orphans in this community, a good news that its reverberation will travel to other climes including Ese's native home. This marks the end of the repressive regime of the oppressors and their gods which has brought refreshing air of freedom to the orphans and the entire community.

Ese in this fascinating novel, assumes the role of a universal personality who is ever ready to confront injustices that are available in diverse environments. The writer paints an enduring portrait of a social crusader and a heroine fighting tirelessly for the oppressed orphans and widows regardless of her location. At every point, she tries to violate the traditional rules of the society to bring succor to the oppressed. In her native community, it's her unrelenting confrontations against the chief and the high priest that earn her the death sentence by hanging for advocating for an egalitarian society that will give equal rights to all. She, however, achieves the victory of freeing widows from communal evil regulations. In exile, she encounters a similar obnoxious situation and decides to continue her effort of fighting against operation.

Atogun presents two settings in *Wake Me When I'm Gone*, the first being the village of origin of Ese and the second which she describes as "my destination, my destiny, my place…"(194). The writer fails to give each of these communities a name as a way of

making them anonymous. In these two, he creates similar signposts as represented by the characters and some of the events. In the first, there is a market, the Main Street and in the second, there is a business enterprise that the protagonist is enmeshed. In the dual settings, Ese is present, the real Noah is present in the first while the mysterious Noah surfaces in the second setting. The real and the mysterious serve the purpose of being co-travellers of the central character. Also constant in both is the agony of the orphans and her continuous struggle to break the rules to liberate them from the shackles of oppression. The plight of these disadvantaged young ones is "a shame to society, to the human race. "(167). By intuition, the second human domain becomes the second phase of a grilling movie where all the conflicts must be resolved. The death of Ada quickens the pace of this resolution. This death makes concrete Ese's resolve "that not one more orphan must die in this village." (171). For her, a "revolutionary consequence" (172) is the option left. In helping this dissident achieve victory, the novelist provides her the latitude of enjoying the support of the ordinary people and the anonymous young chief.

On her second fight against the agents of the celestial as represented by the priests, she encounters challenges similar to the previous in her native home. But in this second battle of wit, the stakes are higher and the punishment for the crime more severe. Finally, the young chief's conspiracy with the Professor and the thunderous support from the ordinary people deliver support on the palms of Ese. In victory, Professor confirms that Ese is "a very kind and courageous woman…qualities you need to make a difference in the society" (189).

Atogun through the use of skillful narrative techniques molds the statue of a radical feminine protagonist in Ese. Ese in her multiple colorations and strength of character, differs from several female fictional characters of Nigerian novelists. The dexterity of her courage and radicalism marks her out from the heroines in the Nigerian novel.

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