

Theodora Adimora's *Hands that Crush Stones*: a foretelling of Gender Inequality in the Pandemic Era

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ABSTRACT

Playwrights are regarded as different parts in one (an ensemble). They can be regarded as artists, philosophers, prophets or foretellers; in whatever way the playwrights are looked at, it is justifiable by their work(s). Theodora Adimora is not left out as her work *Hands that Crush Stones* foretells of a social vice during the pandemic era, where many women were left to do 'riskier' and 'harder' jobs to keep their families going. This was because some of their men and husbands refused to do 'menial' jobs when they were laid off of their 'prestigious' jobs due to the pandemic while others battered their wives and other women for no justifiable reason(s). However, this study seeks to see to what extent the 'prophecies' of the playwright came to pass; and to what level did gender inequality thrive in the pandemic. The theories adopted here are the Marxist theory and Humanist Feminist theory. Furthermore, this study used the descriptive survey and textual analysis which helped the researcher in understanding the sociological perspectives of the text and subject matter. The findings showed that gender inequality became a pandemic itself during the Covid era while as an ideology it is not accepted by many enlightened individuals in the society and at the same time fulfilling the prophecies of the playwright in the pandemic era.

Word count: 212

Gender inequality and the African Culture

From the findings gotten by this researcher, it has been observed that one cannot separate gender inequality from the African culture as the African culture in itself is patriarchal in its entirety. To corroborate this assertion, Asen, Rosemary. (2014) "Presentation of Feminist Issues in Tess Onwueme's *Then She Said it* and Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House*", she notes that in Nigeria, womanhood is brought low to even a third-class citizen, hence, there is a common general belief system that the best place for the feminine gender is in a man's 'kitchen'. This opinion has increased the concept of misrepresentation of the feminine gender's rights from the family front to the society at large. The African cum Nigerian society is deeply into patriarchy which is the main element of the African traditional society. The structure is a set of social relations with a base which empowers men to keep women in subjugation. The feminine gender is therefore segregated from (not limited to,

getting formal schooling, ill-treated and continuously left at home as domestic helps; the average African female is viewed as a ready object for harlotry, human trafficking, rape, forced marriage, and an inappropriate gender in the human environment. Therefore, the presupposed unimportance that is labelled with the status of females in the human society has barely reduced an average female to a lowly item. To corroborate this, Apejoye Esther (2020) in her article *Patriarchy and Women Representation in Effiong Johnson's Install the Princess* notes that patriarchy is perhaps one of the most debated topics in contemporary Nigerian society. It plagues the different facets of the society, some in a subtle way while others in more obvious ways (217).

Taking to the side of the above researchers, Agbaje Abiola (2018), argues that, patriarchy has a lot to do with the African society and ways of life, and that patriarchy is highly exalted in the norms, traditions and cultures (32) of the black continent. In sub-Saharan Africa, the masculine gender lords over the feminine gender; "it is the males' will and cultural norms that dominate and legislate" (15). As a matter of fact, the males are given birth to as a more important gender in the human society, and the masculine gender (men or children) are considered and seen above the feminine gender and girl children.

Asiyanbola Abidemi (2017), notes that segregation against female children is an important part of African and Nigerian patriarchy. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, a man child is more wanted than a female, the main reason for this is that female children are "perceived as expendable commodities who will eventually be married out to other families to procreate and ensure the survival of the spouses' lineage by bearing sons" (81). Most times, in an attempt to birth boys, many matured males would marry another wife (aside the first, especially when she has not given birth to a son). Hence, a concomitant effect of this kind of situation on the feminine gender is that "a woman with no sons is plagued with social insecurity as she lives in constant fear of losing her marriage and her homestead to another woman" (89). Not placing much value on a female could be part of the reasons why many parents and guardians ensure their young female children are taken into early marriages. For instance, there exist a tradition of *ukuthwala* in South Africa, this is done mostly "in rural Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal where girls, sometimes as young as 9 years old are forced into marriage" (3).

This subjugation of the female gender is portrayed from the process of coming into a marriage in which a matured male pays the price on the head of the woman (which is often called bride price), this significantly makes the woman one of her husband's properties. This mentality that the man owns his wife is portrayed in many ways. For instance, in most parts of Nigeria, "the act of payment of bride price is perceived as an outright act of transfer of a woman's rights in her family to her spouse's family" (16). Also, in many states in Africa after the ceremony of the marriage, the wife is forced by tradition to bear her husband's name as her surname, erasing her father's name completely from her name.

To further buttress this fact, in Africa, therefore, "the sexuality of married women is perceived to be in the domain of the control of their husbands" (19). For instance, in

Botswana even a single-parent who is a woman is not allowed to meet with any male other than the man for whom she bore offsprings for; in other words, the culture does not permit a female to have two men at the same time. Whereas, a man is at liberty to have many wives or concubines if he so wishes “whilst the woman, a concubine or second wife should always be faithful to one man” (20). Discrimination or segregation against the womanhood is also seen in the traditional ordinances on younger females to steer clear from sex before a marital covenant, but on the other hand, there exist no law that restrict younger males or on older males from tying marital ties with younger females.

Gender Inequality in Hands That Crush Stone

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Hands that Crush Stones* according to the playwright in an interview was birthed via;

A newspaper article I read about women stone crushers. And because I had also seen it before, that article ignited my interest to write on what these women go through. If you observe, some of these women are very poor; and some of them are widows. Very few people who have better options will do that kind of work. It is a very tedious kind of work. So, those women who do it are poor. They have no one to help them, they are just struggling to survive. (Appendix 2)

This play is a gender inequality expedition that dramatizes the plight of a group of poverty-stricken women (stone crushers) who are exploited by a character called Chief Mbu, a business man and politician during a period of economic downturn in the country (which could be likened to the pandemic era). These women who are led by Uto, a woman of indomitable strength declare a strike and stand their ground irrespective of Chief Mbu's subjective and cruel reaction against them. These women stood their grounds until their demands are met.

According to the playwright, *Hands that Crush Stones* is a subtle blend of form and content, ideas and idiosyncrasies not intentionally written to portray the cruelty of patriarchy but to show the plight of the poor women in the hands of heartless men who are in the seat of authority (133). The play is quite empowering and realistic; it is also highly symbolic as the men represent the stone while the hands that crush stones are the women. Therefore, irrespective of how strong and domineering a man seems to be, a woman's hand is capable of crushing it to their taste. This assertion can further be explained when the character Chief Mbu said thus:

Well, come forward and receive your money for last month. You will be paid this new salary from today... women are important to us in Izunga Local Government and their welfare is paramount in our plan... we have made their interest a cardinal issue in our administration and if voted in again as chairman of the local government in the forthcoming election, I will continue

with the good work and ensure that our women got what they deserve as mothers, wives and citizens of this country and this number one local government (p.41).

The women stoop to conquer patriarchy and gender inequality by coming together to speak with one voice without being afraid of death. Although the playwright maintained that patriarchy or gender inequality was not her intention while writing the play, she further explained that she was writing a play to portray the plight of the women in an unstable economic era of a given society. On the other hand, the implication is that the society seems to naturalize patriarchy that is why Single Bone was confident enough to shout on the women by telling them to “shut up... who you be to speak to chief like that” (29), just as was portrayed in many homes during the pandemic era as many women lost their voice. And at some point we see that he hits one of the women. These acts suggest intimidation and threat to silence them against their wish for self-expression against the males, and are compelled into obedience to the men against their wish.

Hands that Crush Stones...A foretelling of Gender Inequality

Although gender inequality seems to be the ideology of majority in the society, women are rapidly evolving in politics and are playing active roles and also fighting for the right of the marginalized women “*Hands that Crush Stone* have shown women’s resilience and courage in the face of untold suffering and inequality of gender. For a woman to become a stone crusher because of hunger, that shows that women are no longer allowing the society to decide their kind of job any more or even fate. Though cruel and hardened, Chief Mbu is not gender biased because he should not have employed the women to work”.

On the other hand, this can be debunked by maintaining that “Chief Mbu employed only women because of his cruel and heartless motive to exploit these women and the women felt they are being exploited because they are women and the society believe that a woman has no right to question the authority of the man”. It was on this ground that one of the female characters Ruki affirmed that women are exploited when she confessed thus:

As I was saying, I told her about stone crushers, about our strike and how chief, has been mistreating us. She turned to people around her and said ‘you see, this is how our women are exploited. I will change all this when I become chairman of our local government’ (p.7).

Based on the above stated facts the fight for equity especially during the Covid 19 era, if not properly handled may lead to another catastrophe called matriarchy where the men will be forced to fight for their right. This is because the sole aim of the women on the struggle for woman’s right seems to look like a payback mission against the men. Every woman seems to be fighting for a political seat just for one mission: to implement the rights of women by

giving voice to voiceless women. The fact that increasing number of women are fighting for this, shows that patriarchy is highly detrimental.

Akachi in her play, is encouraging the women not to allow gender inequality of patriarchy to relinquish them to a demoted corner of being seen than heard. She, being an activist is advocating that women should learn to agree on one goal and their success is inevitable irrespective of the obstacles and challenges that society may pose at them.

Akachi also makes use of folktales, proverbs and idioms to enrich the play. These proverbs are deeply rooted in the struggle against exploitation, poverty and inhumanity. They also serve as a strategic means of saying one's view with great emphasis and deep sense of conviction and understanding. Uto uses proverbs to convince the chief of his ill action to them because they are women.

Uto: (calmly) Not so, chief. A toad can blame no one but himself for not growing tail. For long we bore this suffering. Our apathy was responsible for our poverty. We accepted slavery and you treated us like worst of slaves... (p.30)

The rise of great capitalist like Chief Mbu is a sign of gender inequality in Nigeria. Since many women could not work in big companies, they were left with no choice other than to face hard labour for meagre salary that can barely provide for their basic needs and their poor household. This is similar to what happened in the pandemic era, where many women resorted to "any job" at all as far as it could sustain their families especially when some of their husbands were not willing to carry out "menial jobs. When gender inequality provides men with perfect psychological backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women; the very patriarchy becomes the brute of power and weaponry exclusive to their hand, the spiritual bonding of man at power, the manly discipline of orders given and orders obeyed, the hierarchical command confirms what the society view as "man's world" where the women are peripheral, irrelevant to the world that counts them as passive spectators to the action that takes place at the centre.

This implies that when patriarchy is viewed as not only permissible but as a heroic behaviour sanctioned by one's government to promote the culture and societal view of taking a woman as a slave, it will also increase other impermissible violence that will make societal morals get lost as patriarchy becomes an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of the necessary game called politics in our society.

In summary therefore, for Akachi Adimora, the negative implications of gender inequality in the society is huge, hence her comments;

Some of the negative implication of such system, or structure is that sometimes women tend to be at the receiving end in obnoxious societal or traditional institutions or structures. Some of them oppress women or hold them down, or subjugate them. I agree...the structures are there. But part of what is happening today is that some of these structures are being dismantled.

You know, patriarchy is beginning to have a human face, especially as more and more people become knowledgeable, educated. I know today, there are many men who give their daughters lands, houses, cars when they marry or even ordinarily. So, things are changing. Women are beginning to inherit things. Certainly, if I am going today, I would make sure that my daughters; my male and female children get things that I can give them.... We still have a long way to go to strike a balance or achieve equality of men and women, because that is ultimately what we are heading for as a society, which we consider as the ideal situation. And we hope that in the future, more and more gender friendly regulations and laws will be put in place so that patriarchy will no longer be able to determine the fate of the female child. Like we see the high rate of kidnap of females in Northern Nigeria or you see people who sell off their daughters at age 10 or 12. These are terrible experiences for young women; girls becoming mothers and wives even as little children. And these are some of the structures that patriarchy upholds, and sometimes religion too (Appendix 2).

Conclusion

This play is indeed an indepth “prophecy” of a trying time like the pandemic era, where many women suffered great losses including jobs and difficulties from their spouses, partners and other people, the pandemic era actually brought out the beast in some of the hearts of some men over some women. This playwright who foresaw this carefully stated to the women in this era to speak with one voice, one mind and one conscience as this will enable them gain their freedom from every patriarchal and gender unequal environment.

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