

Sofola's Place in the West African Women Writers Canon



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B

ORN on 22nd June,

1935, Zulu Sofola lived for sixty years and made a significant mark in Nigerian female writing. The first published Nigerian female dramatist, she wrote about fourteen plays, some of which are still in manuscript. Her Christian faith leaves a major impact on her dramatic and theoretical writings, and so does her ambiguous heritage of Igbo and Edo cultures. She, like other Nigerian writers, excepting Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, the two giants who straddled the rapidly expanding space of African literature, have not received enough critical attention, not because of the lacunae and technical flaws in her plays, as argued by Olu Obafemi, but primarily because literature as a discipline has not been accorded its due recognition in the country.

Zulu Sofola is not a feminist writer if by that expression is meant a conscious attempt to subvert male hegemony and invert gender relations. Her criticism of female oppression is inscribed within the general context of social injustice. She adopts a conceptual approach that a person be treated not on the basis of gender but purely as a human being worthy of respect. However, her perspective is neither Marxist nor socialist. Basically, it is Christian and essentialist. Economic rearrangements and political engineering, she would argue, can redress some of the gender imbalances but cannot provide answers to all the existential problems afflicting society. There is a strong suggestion in her writing that fallen humanity requires individual morality, a profound internal revolution, to attain and repossess the lost state of grace. Love, she seems to believe, is the key. The utopian solution, which can be practised only on an individual basis, reveals one of the weaknesses of liberal feminism, viz the absence of a collective approach, or the disregard for women liberation organizations.

Although she did not write between 1840 and 1880, Zulu Sofola could be rightly placed within the Feminine phase of Elaine Showalter's periodized developmental evolution of female literary tradition. There are many images of woman that radical feminists would frown at in her plays. The images are products of internalized assumptions about the roles expected of a Christian woman. 'The feminist content of feminine art', according to Showalter, 'is typically oblique, displaced, ironic and subversive,

one has to read it between the lines, in the missed possibilities of the text'.² Zulu Sofola's sexual politics is circumscribed by Apostle Paul's injunction that wives submit themselves to their husbands. Informed by Christian precepts and tenets, her creative works would collectively be read by a radical feminist critic as a reproduction of male psychology through female complicity. As Maggie Humm wrote in *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 'Feminist critics argue that Graeco-Roman myths are often masculine constructs whose narratives only reflect the anxieties of male psyches. The main project of feminist myth critics is to move away from these constructions, perhaps to find that myths are originally feminine or at least to discover the outlines of some earlier, more specifically female, mythologies'.³ In *The White Goddess* Robert Graves elicits the residue of primitive religions in Christianity. According to him, "Christian legend, dogma and ritual are the refinement of a great body of primitive and even barbarous beliefs, ... the only original element in Christianity is the personality of Jesus".⁴ Sofola explores in her dramas indigenous Nigerian myths and arrives at Christian conclusions.

The wind of feminism blowing with full force over the Europe-American society is portentous. The radical feminist movement in the United States of America is largely responsible for the collapse of the marriage institution, which exacerbates the problems of drug abuse, vagrancy and violence in that free society. Yet, it would be criminal to stop the wind, for women have suffered immensely at the hands of men and really need to be liberated. Nevertheless, a wholesale importation of the sexist jargon of the radical, or marxist, or psychoanalytical, American feminists into literary criticism in Nigeria is likely to produce adverse effects on gender and marital relations in the country. In the creative writing of a liberal Christian like Sofola the jargon would confuse rather than clarify issues.

Sofola could be conveniently classified as a liberal feminist. Her goal as a writer is justice for all - male or female - a guarantee of equality of opportunity. The two forms of liberal feminism identified by Rosemarie Tong in *Feminist Thought*⁵ - the 'classical' that seeks to protect civil

liberties like property rights, voting rights, freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of association and the 'welfarist' that makes economic justice its main preoccupation - coalesce in her writing. However, Sofola's African, liberal feminism differs from the American. It does not totally reject the cultural past but carefully selects and accepts its ennobling aspects, for example, respect for elders and communal existence. Some of the African, Christian and family values espoused by her, for example, amiability, humility, and wives honouring their husbands, would be denounced and rejected by American liberal feminists as stereotypical creations of men to control and subjugate women.

The *Sweet Trap* is centred upon sexual politics in marriage. The playwright posits that, if only for the sake of marital stability and peace on the home front, a wife must accept, as commanded by God, the headship of her husband. Sofola explores the Oke-Badan festival, a ritual of atonement, a reawakening of the collective unconscious, that emphasizes the need for a periodic, communal and ritualized purgation of repressed sexual energies and accumulated tension for psychic and social harmony. The sin of 'the primal scene' committed during a period of stress in the primordial past is atoned for and it is the people's belief that the atonement would purify their prurient dreams and desires. The festival, like all art, is therapeutic. Every society creates harmless devices for ridding itself of accumulated pollutants and relieving tension. A Christian takes the Holy Communion occasionally to appease the suppressed unholy appetite for animal and human sacrifice. The United States created or revives dangerous games like boxing, parachuting, wrestling and the rodeo to sublimate the American's passion for blood and violence which was given free reign in the frontier and plantation days. Gatsby's large and wild parties in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* serve the same purpose and, in addition, reduce the restlessness of the celebrant-dreamer of fame and wealth. It is not only patriarchal primitive societies that employ ritual to control human behaviour.

Sofola casts the ritual of communal

purgation in an ironical mode. Take, for example, the explanation on why Oke-Badan is a sexist festival: 'Well, that was how our forebears felt and so it was'.⁶ In other words, the patriarchs who inaugurated the festival as part of the ideological and political machinery to legitimize male hegemony lacked knowledge, or else they would have involved their womenfolk in the ritual attempt to cleanse the society morally, psychologically, and spiritually.

In the play, Clara kneels down and apologises to her husband for disobeying his order that she must not celebrate her birthday. American liberal feminists would take umbrage at Clara's penitent action and take the playwright as one of the women still trapped in the ideological net of male despotism. One of the reasons why generally marriages do not last in our day is woman's refusal to accept that the husband is the head of a home. In a desperate bid to live a life of independence, firebrand feminists even reject marriage as an oppressive institution designed to enslave women. They either end up as lesbians, or commit suicide, or live an emotionally thwarted life. In *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, Zillah Eisenstein offered the following biographical information on Mary Wellstonecraft, a liberal feminist who authored the highly influential book *A vindication of the Rights of Women*: 'Within her private, personal life, she tried unsuccessfully to live the life of independence. She tried to commit suicide twice as a result of an intense and long love affair with Imlay, rejected the notion of marriage for herself until late in life, had a child out of wedlock by choice... and died in childbirth'.⁷ A totally liberated wife may try even adultery as a way of demonstrating her newfound freedom to use her body as she deems fit. We are told that Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill - both liberal feminists - carried on a close relationship for twenty years, 'routinely saw each other for dinner and frequently spent weekends together along the English coast.' Her husband, John Taylor, 'agreed to this arrangement in return for the "external formality" of Harriet residing as his wife in his house.'⁸ Thank God, she waited for her husband to die a natural death before marrying her lover, unlike



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the impatient Acoli woman who sings:

*Lightning, strike my husband,
Strike my husband
Leave my lover;
Ee, leave my lover.⁹*

Zulu Sofola would be scandalized by the adulteress's murderous desire and put to shame by all the sleezy talk of phallogocentrism in the psychoanalytical school of feminist criticism. While she accepts that many gender conflicts are generated by culture, she simultaneously recognizes that some sex-based differences are biologically or naturally given. She conceives of marriage essentially as a paradoxical institution.

In *Wedlock of the Gods* Ogwoma rebels against the tradition of her people in two important ways. First, she violates the taboo that forbids a woman mourning her husband's death from having a sexual relationship with another man. Second, she refuses to marry Okezie, her husband's brother, by whom custom demands that she have a child for Adigwu (her husband) for whom she did not have any. Ogwoma takes her husband's death as an opportunity to marry Uloko, her true lover, who could not afford the bride price with which her parents hoped to procure the medical treatment for her sick brother. Her parents forced her to marry Adigwu, the higher bidder, for money, even though he did not love him at all. The conflicts of the play are multidimensional. One, there is the conflict

there is the conflict between the old communal mode of existence and the new capitalist individualism.

Members of Onowu family invoke the ghost of communalism and censure Ibekwe for having sold his daughter for money to spend on Edozie when he could simply have sought their financial assistance. Of course, Ibekwe defends himself by citing a few instances of request sent to members of the family which were not granted. Sofola is indirectly saying that new economic forces arising from social change are putting a lot of pressure on individuals and tearing apart the extended family system. The idea is not expressly stated. Given her paradoxical vision, it is difficult to identify precisely

between Ogwoma who wants to satisfy her desire for love and her parents who want her to sacrifice her heart's desire for her brother's sake. Two, there is the conflict between the traditional practice of parents choosing a husband for their daughter and the modern liberalism of allowing a daughter to exercise her right to freedom of choice. In a patriarchal society, women are expected to be complaisant and submissive, but Ogwoma is an independent and strong-willed soul, a threat to male rule. Three, there is the age-old conflict over who, between a man and a woman, is to be held responsible for a sex scandal. In Ogoli's view, a woman is invariably the guilty party: 'A man goes to a woman. It is the woman who opens the door.'¹⁰ Finally,

where her sympathies lie. It seems that she accepts some aspects of other indigenous and modern cultures and rejects others. The metaphor of a ram tied and whipped along the way to the altar for Ogwoma signifies that the playwright advocates the right of a woman to choose her future partner. But the claim of sisterly love for a sick brother is equally strong and makes the parents' choice a reasonable one. Sofola questions the bridewealth tradition that reduces women to chattels, the anachronistic view that: '... a man's daughter is his source of wealth.' (p.28), but she affirms at the same time the value placed on children, the most precious possessions, in Africa.

A Christian humanist, Sofola portrays Ogwoma's insensitive attitude to her husband's death and her getting pregnant for Uloko even while she is still in mourning as immoral. In condemning Ogwoma's impatience and rebellious behaviour, she appeals to people's notions of dignity, honour, propriety, and shame. The Christian in her cannot but disapprove of Odibei's act of vengeance, especially the recourse to magic and witchcraft to terminate the life of her daughter-in-law who, she thinks kills her son in order to marry her lover. According to the Holy Writ, vengeance is God's. Uloko disobeys this peace-maintaining ordinance of God, avenges his lover's death, and murders Odibei. After the act of vengeance, he looks for, finds, and swallows what is left of the poison that killed Ogwoma. Theirs is a wedlock in death. In resolving the conflicts in the play, Sofola shuns a mechanistic device and settles for the passion for vengeance which, ironically, issues out of love for a son, on Odibei's part, and for a lover, on Uloko's. The paradox of love and hate is well orchestrated. Dying, Uloko makes a powerful, emotion-laden speech that contains the essence of the playwright's Christian vision:

*We shall leave this cursed place
We shall ride on the cotton of the heavens
We shall ride to where there is peace. (p.56)*

Sofola's is the dream of paradise, where the perfect love that our fallen

nature makes impossible in our God-cursed world shall be fully realized. The representation of the New Jerusalem, with which the play ends, signifies that Sofola's theme transcends that of human love, the primary concern of Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*. Rather, it is the love that defies the trammels of custom and family and transcends human understanding. She takes the divine promise of the Son of God as the solution to the tragedy of a collapsed world and translates it into a powerful dramatic statement. The only perceptible flaw in the representation of paradise is the inclusion of the temporal images of the 'sun' and 'night', for the City of God 'had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof' (Revelation 21:33).

Linguistic experimentation constitutes Sofola's most important technical achievement in *The Wizard of Law*, a farcical play that makes a mockery of women who marry for money, of lawyers who employ conundrums, confusing syllogistic arguments and deceitful actions to wriggle out of difficult situations and of traders who use all manner of sharp practices and tricks to fob off their overpraised wares on unwilling customers and make excess profits. A battle of false wits, the play captures the spirit of contemporary Nigerian society - its amorality and materialism - and depicts the world as full of dissemblers, as devoid of trust. Living is represented as a 'game' of deceit that is lost by the credulous and the gullible and won by the shrewd.

Sikira marries lawyer Ramoni under the illusion that the bunch of keys that sounds in his pocket is money. When reality breaks upon her, she not only nags but abuses her husband, who consequently resorts to ignoble tricks to meet his material needs. She changes her tune when the lawyer brings home nine metres of velveteen lace to make new clothes for the impending Ileya festival, and her 'foolish' husband suddenly becomes a 'fine husband. The best husband in the world'.¹¹ A stricture against the increasing wave of materialism in our society, the play reveals the power of money, the universal whore, that not only mediates all human relationships but perverts, inverts and subverts all values.

Rafiu plays Ramoni and sells at N180.00 the cloth that normally should have cost half that price. But, as Lamidi warns the joyous cloth-seller: 'You get luck now, but bad luck dey for corner' (p. 12). Ramoni, with the collaboration of his wife, feigns illness, madness, and epileptic attacks when Rafiu comes to collect the money for the cloth. Sikira tells a confused Rafiu: 'That man that called himself Ramoni Alao has deceived you'. She adds: 'That thief knew about your father and my husband and used it to cheat you' (p. 18). The play is prophetic, for its premier performance at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, in May 1973, scams (which in popular parlance is currently called '419') were relatively unknown in Nigeria. Sikira's complaint: 'You made me tell a lie' and Ramoni's response: 'Cleverness is not a lie, my dear' (p. 19) provide the two contradictory views of social life in the play. Sofola's moral vision is informed by both God's law that forbids lying and stealing and the environmentalist idea that society makes us into what we are.

Rafiu reconciles himself to the loss of the cloth money but, as predicted by Lamidi, he is not done with bad luck. Akpan, his low-paid goat-keeper, has consumed the goats in his care. Rafiu takes Akpan to court for theft. The presence of Ramoni, the defence lawyer arouses in Rafiu the passion for economic justice on the cloth matter. In the process of laying a charge of cheating against Akpan and Ramoni he gets utterly confused and is ordered by the judge to be sent to a mental hospital for treatment, together with Akpan who bleats like a goat in response to all questions. Asked to pay the agreed legal fee, after the dismissal of the case, Akpan bleats and used the trick taught him by the lawyer against him. The reversal of role - the proud lawyer becoming the gull and the clownish, foolish client the clever wit - is extremely farcical. 'Fools', according to J.L. Styan in *Drama, Stage and Audience*, 'are free of laws'.¹² The freedom is the basis of the principle of a-morality in comedy. Akpan proves by his action that 'with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you' (Mark 4: 24), a Christian principle that admonishes all professionals and workers to practise righteousness in all their dealings.

Much of the laughter is generated by language. Code-mixing, code-switching, mother tongue interferences, and pidgin English that unites the working class in Nigeria are profusely used to produce farcical effects, as exemplified in the following discourse:

Sikira: Size kini?

Ramoni: Your shoe

Sikira: Shoe ke?

Ramoni: Eh, shoe ('sh' pronounced as 's' bata)

Sikira: B - a - t - a

Ramoni: Eh, bata, abi you don't want bata for lace?

Sikira: I want ke (p. 4)

Many phonetic and syntactic problems encountered by Yoruba users of English are highlighted in the play. The mixing of codes and registers is expressive of the psychological disorientation brought by colonialism. However, the use of an impeccable style by Rafiu when he goes to dun Ramoni creates a problem. Sikira, too, uses the same correct style which, in our judgement, is illustrative of a failure of craft on the part of the playwright in the dunning episode. As Rafiu leaves the scene because of the fear that if his debtor dies of the epileptic attack he is likely to be held responsible, he 'curses and grumbles in the vernacular, then ends in English', according to the stage direction (p.22). The duplicity noticeable in the behaviour of the characters is reflected in their double consciousness and dual cultural heritage and in the slippery nature of language itself. It is important to remark that Rafiu reverts to Yoruba, his first language, when he is most excited. The implication is that the mother tongue is the easiest and most natural language.

Style is an index of identity. Akpan's incompetent use of the English language is reflective of his low social status and poor educational background. To Ramoni's question: 'And what is the allegation?' Akpan replies: 'No bi alligator, no crocodile, na common goat, sah...' (p. 28). His use of the heavily onomatopoeic nonce-word gbee contributes immensely to a comic resolution of the play's conflicts. Farces thrive on such an improbable situation as

presented in the court-room, namely a man metamorphosing into a goat and bleating as one. The point that Sofola is making is that the evil economic system operating in the society has lowered Akpan to the animal level. She indicts a dehumanising socio-economic system that transforms people into beasts and savages, cut-throats, liars, thieves, robbers, and prostitutes. She sculpts the character of Akpan in such a way that the reader's empathy is aroused. She does not just denounce theft, she uses the story of Akpan and the missing goats to call for just wages, as revealed in the following dialogue:

Akpan: *Na suffer suffer na him I deh suffer since I come work for this goat-seller. So when I tell am many times say de money no sufficient, I come begin sell de goat for money for food. (eager to present a good image of himself). I nobi tief, true to God. I nobi tief. My mama no teach me tiefry. I swear.*

Ramoni: So...

Akpan: *So when life come hard too much, I come sell some goat for money weh I go take buy gari. De goat weh die. I come et that one. Dat na troot, sah (pp. 29-30)*

As portrayed by Zulu Sofola, Akpan is a thief and not a thief. Equivocation is the name of the game played by the playwright. Ramoni's poor handling of English reveals that he is an incompetent and fake lawyer. The irony in the play's title is unmistakable. The lawyer uses a noun as a verb: 'We must renegotiation it' and supplies further evidence of his falseness and falsity: '(thinking hard as he calculates). For such a case of deliberate and premeditation burglary, the normal fee is N500.00 but I shall be consideration and leniency with you and charge you N300,00' (p. 31). The solecisms portray the lawyer as a braggart and as an impostor. In a bid to impress his client with his mastery of English, he makes grammatical blunders.

Lawyers are imaged through the use of irony as liars in the play. They turn logic upside down, prevaricate and quibble without compunction. Perhaps,

the greatest lie told by them is that they are learned. The Bible in this regard, presents a despicable image of lawyers: 'Woes unto you lawyers! for ye have taken the key of knowledge: ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered'. (St Luke 11:52). Rafiu adds 'sah' to almost all his statements during the conversation with the proud lawyer in his shop. It is not clear whether he does so to honour or humour Ramoni. But one thing is certain: he plays the obsequious toad, or the ironic trader, who feigns humanity to cod his customers. 'Sah' is thus used ambiguously as a mark of respect and as a trade gimmick. Lawyers exude might and power and illiterates hold them in high esteem in Nigeria. It is this image of greatness created for lawyers in the popular imagination that leads an expansive Ramoni to tell Rafiu: '...we used to call you 'Oriede' (p. 8). The diminutive expresses both contempt and endearment and is highly comical.

On the whole, Sofola succeeds in the use of pidgin English, which really is not surprising, for she came from an area where pidgin English is a language of everyday intercourse. The variety of English used in the play carries a heavy dose of Yoruba accent which is in tune with the Ibadan setting. The linguistic experiment gives the play an effect that is profoundly comical. Sofola exposes how traders and lawyers treacherously use language to hoodwink people. A satire on our labyrinthine judicial system that takes illusion for reality, on our unjust economic system that dehumanizes workers, and on the entire society that makes people mad, the play is quite successful, perhaps her best comedy.

A political satire on the evil of dictatorship, *King Emene* is cast in the idiom of ritual. Its message is that for a polluted land to be rid of its accumulated sins, the human agent of the ritual cleansing, like Jesus, must be seen to be pure. Hence it is imperative for King Emene to embark on an act of expiation, for without confession there can be no forgiveness. Although a religious theme, it is given a vibrant political interpretation by the playwright. King Emene's desire to usher in the Peace Week without first atoning for the crime committed by his

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mother, the murder of his half-brother, to guarantee his unchallenged ascendancy to the vacant throne, amounts to putting the cart before the horse. It can be likened to a sinner's eagerness to enter into God's kingdom without first obeying His commandments. It just would not work. The Oracle, according to Nwani, demands 'that every place is clean and in order' before the king can 'carry the problems of the people of Oligbo to our God.'¹³ God answers the prayers of only the righteous, and cleanliness is next to godliness.

King Emene takes all those who draw his attention to the necessity for an act of atonement as his enemies. He is consequently surrounded by sycophants who are led by Jigide, an Achiophel-like character. Jigide counsels the King to use an iron hand on his subjects and not to rule with compassion, for 'the person you pity and help is the same one who slaps your face afterwards' (p.28). His political philosophy is amoral, Machiavellian, Nietzschean and nihilistic. It can lead only to anarchy.

The Oracle can be interpreted as a metaphor for the Bible, the Word of God (Jesus), or the Old Testament prophet (Nathan) sent by God to a sinful king David. Whereas David recognizes his unworthiness and confesses his sin, Emene is adamant and commits more transgressions. At the end of Act One, he tells Servant: 'Remove the palm wine and keep things clean and in order.' He mistakes the spiritual-symbolic word of God for the literal. The meaning and significance of the New Yam Festival is lost on him. All he cares for is the pomp and pageantry of the ritual performance. Drunken with power and made sottish with wine, he, like the hypocritical Pharisees, washes the outer part of the cup while the inside is left dirty. Allegorical, the play reminds one in many ways of the behaviour of the political leadership in Nigeria - civilian or military. The Nigerian government presents a false front to the world and meets its international obligations but fails woefully to put its own house in order. King Emene refuses to see members of the Olinzele Council, and turns down both Queen's plea and Ojei's (his godfather's) advice that he should obey the Oracle. All the appeals to the

present military dictatorship in Nigeria to redress past political wrongs, especially the nullification of the June 12 presidential election which is adjudged by foreign observers as the best so far conducted in the country, are treated with contempt and yet it wants to build a strong, peaceful and united nation. It, too, like King Emene, dwells in a world of illusion. Diokpa uses homely images that express the playwright's political ideas in lucid terms. The 'pot' represents the kingdom (the state) and the 'bubbles' the citizens; and 'when the pot burns, the bubbles perish' (p.18). The international community has turned the heat on the pot of Nigeria's political economy and one can only hope that the bubbles will not burst, especially since the political leadership, like Emene, is excessively arrogant. It too, like King Emene, is 'blinded by power and desire for supremacy' (p.18). The people's

bitterly night and day when she had no food for her hungry children. I could not bear this, so I started praying very early for a better life. My prayers were answered. Your father married me. My fortune and that of my children changed. I promised myself then never to return to those miserable days.' (p.44). Nneobi speaks for the Nigerian ruling class. Their greed and criminal propensities are driven by the fear of returning to a life of misery. Haunted by their poor background, they try to escape forever from the pangs of hunger and, therefore, steal more than can actually meet their needs when they find themselves in positions of power. The moral of the play is simple: the love of money is the root of all evils. Money in our age of materialism has become a god that is sometimes worshipped with human lives. But, also, the vanity of human wishes asserts its

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concern for their defiled land and their desire to avert the impending disaster are misinterpreted by the dictatorial king as insolence and disrespect. In short, King Emene and the present military government in Nigeria share so many affinities that the two tyrannical powers simply collapse into one monolithic and oppressive regimen.

Sekwutu sees 'a dark circle around the sun' (p.41). The sun is a symbol for the light of God which the sin of murder committed by Nneobi, the king's mother, would not allow to shine upon Oligbo. In spite of her enormous resources - both human and material - Nigeria remains an underdeveloped country, principally because it is ruled by the blind whose iniquities, like the rape of democracy, the elevation of lying to a statecraft, the looting of the nation's treasury, and the murder of innocent citizens, keeps it perpetually in the dark. Nneobi explains why she committed the murder: 'I suffered in my childhood with a poor mother of twelve children. I saw my mother cry

bitter truth in the end! The king enters into the sacred shrine, against all advice, sees a boa (the symbol of the Devil), and commits suicide. The soul that sins, Sofola warns the audience, shall die.

In *Old Wine Are Tasty*, Okebuno, an educated and alienated African, seeks political power to revolutionize his people's 'backward' society. Arrogant, impatient and unwilling to learn, he abuses his elders, talks down to them, and fails to gain their support and votes. He thinks that money can buy him their votes. The conflict between Okebuno who dreams of progress for his country and the elders of his village who insist on being treated with respect elicits the good and bad points of the modern and the traditional value systems. The playwright's message is that we must first study our society very well in order to know what needs to be changed in it, so that we do not destroy in haste what we are yet to understand. Akuagwu admonishes Okebuno: 'know our wine so that you may know what to mix with it.'¹⁴ Most often Africans throw

away vital elements of their indigenous culture in ignorance only to start searching for them after the white man has embraced them. Consider, for example, the recourse to breastfeeding. However, it is necessary to state that Sofola does not advocate an unqualified acceptance of the indigenous way of life. Eliciting her personal opinions and views from the conflict of ideas that runs through the play is a herculean task, for she allows the protagonist and the antagonists to articulate their positions without any undue interference. It is a measure of her maturity as a writer. The following contradictory views illustrate the point:

Iyese: A man who does not know simple greetings; a man who hasn't the slightest idea of how elders should sit at meetings; a man who does not know how to talk before men who are the age of his grandfather has nothing to tell the leaders in Lagos about us! (p. 21)

Okebuno: Men out there in the world don't look into the future backwards. They do not allow thin webs of anachronistic tradition to blind them to truth. This country is on the upsurge for modernity, progress and civilization, not interested in how to greet senile men. (p. 21)



like a child and a weakling. The statement is so ordinary that a critic may fail to notice that Sofola is subtly debunking one of the old myths or female stereotypes. Ogbelani, a male chauvinist, argues that if Okebuno had been brought up by his father's people, he would have been a full-fledged man. Ogbelani forgets that there are women in Okebuno's father's family who would affect his upbringing even more deeply than would the men. Ogbelani exposes his ignorance about child raising even among his own people.

The villagers' criticism of their young ones who go to Lagos and 'forget everything' is not only restrained but laced with witticisms. Ego, whose tongue is apparently the sharpest, has a knack for cracking meaningful sexual jokes. Even Dumkwu, the village gossip, is a fascinating character. Her rhetorical power is superb; her tropes are robust. Commenting on the prevalent evil of adultery in the contemporary world, she says: 'It is difficult nowadays to find wives with good heads. Young girls today... catch their husbands with medicine... so that they can easily invite him to behold them and their lovers do the devil's work in the broad daylight. Anyasi, a man who gets a good wife today must give his god a cow. What one sees nowadays is enough to blind a blindman!' (p. 8). The loose sexual habit of our permissive twentieth-century society has produced the AIDS plague. The villagers' natural intelligence renders jejune Okebuno's vaunted but borrowed knowledge. Sofola stresses family and

traditional values like amiability, marital fidelity, and love. The family is the basic political unit and when it is rotten, the entire socio-political fabric of a nation is rent. The Okebunos should be told that the world out there, especially in the United States, family values have attained such an important status in the scheme of things that they now constitute a major plank in the manifestos of the two dominant political parties. As Anyasi aptly puts it: '...whitman's education does not wipe out our ways' (p. 9). However, Sofola would not subscribe to Anyasi's unqualified notion that 'Elders have more power than the young' (p. 10), or the uninformed opinion that it is 'homeless people' who live in Lagos (p. 11). Sofola's sympathies are undoubtedly extended to Okebuno, but she recognizes the potential danger posed by his intellectual arrogance and impatience to the over-all development of the society. Trite as the values of patience, restraint, self-control and temperance are, they would have prevented Okebuno from crashing his car into a tree in a moment of blind fury. He probably dies in the smash. The crash itself is a metaphor for the tragedy of his political agenda. Okebuno cannot eat with his village folk and the elders, as a Yoruba proverb puts it, because he has not learnt to wash his hands clean. The nation is still groaning under the yoke of his 'new way of ruling people', which is ultimately divisive and destructive. Although he is progressive, or appears to be so, and means well for his land, Okebuno lacks manners, the finer quality. The logic of Izuani is unassailable; a politician who does not have a modicum of respect for people cannot plan well for them. Okebuno dies, not because he opposes tradition, as Olu Obafemi would have us believe, but because he lacks self-control.

In *Song of a Maiden*, the river goddess of Shao, a village in Kwara State, Nigeria, makes a wedding between professor Oduyinka and Yetunde, a maiden of the village, a condition for co-operation between the villagers and the academics who have come to conduct a climatological research project. The wedding is a symbolic expression of the fruitful and symbiotic relation that is supposed to exist between the critiqued

elite and the rural poor. In other words, the latter must not be seen as purely material to be used for academic research and abandoned thereafter. It is a politico-economic statement, which is not by any means different from the Marxist call for the abolition of class. There is no metaphor in the world that captures the interfusion of living souls better than marriage does. The marriage of the Lamb and the Church in Christian eschatology prefigures the ultimate reconciliation of all warring entities, the recovery of the lost Oneness of the Beginning. Sofola uses a mythopoetic, ritual-laden symbolic language that can easily be misunderstood and undervalued by a literalist interpreter as a celebration of male exploitation of female. Shao that gives the condition for a fruitful working relationship between the intellectuals and the peasants is a Matriarch Figure. Her narrative is the central theme of literature. She symbolizes beauty, fertility (in the womb of woman and in the soil), growth, love, and life. A force that unites man and woman and hypothetically resolves all contradictions, love leads to marriage and marriage to reproduction of life, growth and continuity of the human race. It is thus clear why marriage is a major motif in Sofola's plays and why family values are emphasized.

Having overcome their initial socio-cultural inhibitions, having, as it were, transcended their class consciousness and come to a knowledge of the symbolic significance of the proposed union, Professor Oduyinka and Yetunde agree to marry. To put it crudely, the Professor commits class suicide and the village maiden overcomes her feeling of inferiority and assumes the reproductive role of the fertility goddess incarnate, as signified by her name. Love conquers all. Sofola thematizes the possibility of an all-conquering love in *Memories in the Moonlight*. After much opposition, Abiona's parents succumb to the force of change, accept the love principle, and allow their daughter to marry a man after her heart, who is much younger than eighty-year old Otakpo, their choice.

The Operators deals with a topical issue, the plague of armed robbery in Nigeria. A shadowy, Rhinehart figure,

Chief Onireke lives a double life - that of a business tycoon and in the day and of a boss of gangsters at night. Eventually, the law catches up with him and his syndicate. The playwright explores the theme from both the environmentalist and morality perspectives. In the *Maternity Series* written for the National Television Authority, Ibadan, which include among others, *Lost Dreams*, *The night Is Dark* and *The Showers* Sofola treats female health problems that destroy the joy of marriage and either strain or snap love relationships. Her liberal feminism takes an open transparent form as it is pressed into the service of analysing problems that are peculiar to women.

In spite of the social relevance and topicality of her themes, Sofola is still advised by Olu Obafemi to 'treat urgent contemporaneous issues' (p. 65). The critic takes Sofola's plots as too simplistic

investigation of gender problems and stereotypes in a language that is unaffected and non-sexist, and an expression of a balanced, liberal feminist vision of life that is founded on Christian morality. Her aged characters, especially the stubborn defenders of tradition, sprinkle their conversations with aphorisms, epigrams, idioms and proverbs translated from their indigenous language into English. Although the technical devices of linear plot, plain diction and simple setting are geared to making the translucent transparent and arcane pellucid, they can easily trip an inattentive critic who, deceived by their surface limpity and openness, considers them to be too simplistic and interprets them as such. Cast in an ironic mode, they express more than is contained in their moulds.

Sofola does not fully explore, as do Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan and Tess

SOFOLA'S vision is utterly paradoxical. Her African, Christian, liberal feminism aids her to build a bridge over the gulf separating hope and despair, the past and the present, the present and the future, male and female, I and Others, et cetera. Her tone is ironic and her protest is gentle.

and underinterpretes her metaphors and symbols. His strictures against the playwright have received a rebuttal from Ayo Akinwale. Sofola's criticism of society is generally conducted in a restrained style. Her satirical thrust are so paradoxical that they can easily pass unrecognized. Most critics gloss over her censure of wife beaters in *The Wizard of Law*, because the matter is broached casually in an oblique manner and dropped. In fact, it is impossible to detect her gender from merely reading her early dramatic works. Her feminism is neither the aggressive bra-burning type nor the defeatist and the plangorous. Paradoxical in vision and ironic in tone, it favours the sublime meridian.

Among the elements that characterize Sofola's dramas are the creative and critical explorations of traditional festivals, initiation rites, customs, institutions and myths, the thematization of female biological roles and accompanying health problems, an

Onwueme, the African multivalent dramatic form: a pot-pourri of action, dance, music, language and song to convey her message, which leaves an austere and spectral effect on her plays. A little relieved by the African content - local referents like the annual marriage fiesta in Shao, the Oke-Badan festival, the Idegbe endogamous system that keeps the blood strain pure but weak, and indigenous figurative expressions -, her dramaturgy evinces a slight bent for the classical European tradition. The influence could be traced to her education in dramatic theory and playwriting. She hones her theatrical tools on an alien whetstone and deploys them effectively in dissecting her diseased society. The result of the clinical examination is the shocking discovery of the depraved nature of humanity. The final cure or solution is two-fold: one, a recognition of the fallen state of suffering humanity and two, an acceptance of that Greater man, Jesus, as the anchor, as the healer. Her plays are didactic but not in a dogmatic manner. They constitute a

significant contribution to the growing body of Nigerian literature in English. The treatment of undying themes like abuse of political power, charlatanism, love, marital problems, sexual politics, gynaecological and obstetrical problems, and vengeance makes hers an imperishable legacy. **GR**

Footnotes:

1. Olu Obafemi, 'Zulu Sofola's Theatre', *Nigeria Female Writers: A critical Perspective*, Henrietta Otokunefor and Obiageli Nwodo, eds. (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 1989), pp. 60-65.
2. Elaine Showalter, *Towards a Feminist Poetics* in K. M. Newton ed. *Twentieth Century Literary Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 270
3. Maggie Hum, *Practising Feminist Criticism* (London: Prentice Hall/Harvester

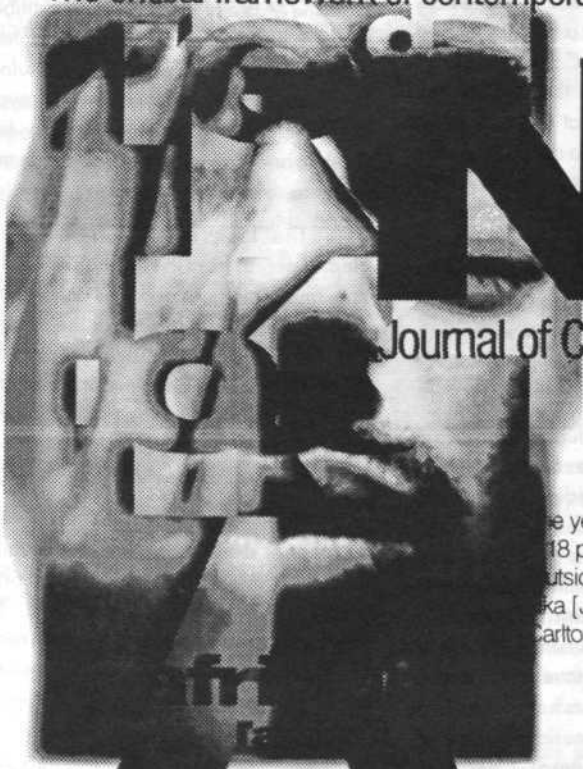
Wheatsheaf, 1995), p 17.

4. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, amended and enlarged edition (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966), p. 242.
5. Rosemarie Tong, 'Liberal Feminism', *Feminist Thought: A comprehensive Introduction* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 11-38
6. Zulu Sofola, *The Sweet Trap* (Ibadan: University press, 1977)
7. Zillah Eisenstein, *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), p. 106.
8. Alice S. Rossi, *Sentiment and Intellect: The Story of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill* 'in *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, Essay on Sex Equality*, Alice S. Rossi, ed. (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1970), p. 28

9. Okot p'Bitek, *Horn of my Love* (London: Heineman, 1974), p. 57.
10. Zulu Sofola, *Wedlock of Gods* (London: Evans, 1981) p.23
11. Zulu Sofola, *The Wizard of Law* (London: Evans, 1975), p. 14
12. J. L. Styan, *Drama, Stage and Audience* (London: Cambridge University Press 1975), p. 88
13. Zulu Sofola, *King Emene* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1986), p. 14
14. Zulu Sofola, *Old Wines Are Tasty* (Ibadan: University press 1991), p. 44.
15. Ayo Akinwale, 'Zulu Sofola: Her writings and their Under-meanings', *Nigeria Female Writers*, pp. 68-73.

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