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The Paradox of the Male in Patriarchal Settings: Reading the Plays of Emeka Nwabueze

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Abstract

As patriarchy solidifies, women have been at the forefront to decry its injustices so that many have thought that men's silencing is because they benefit from the system of patriarchy. In much of dramatic productions, women have equally been at the forefront of changing the derogatory perceptions about them in patriarchal societies since the rhetoric often portrays them as the vulnerable group. Interestingly, the marginalization of men in patriarchy is often given a lacklustre attention, and the playwright, Emeka Nwabueze, demonstrates in his plays that men are equally victims of patriarchy. Gayatri Spivak's discourse of epistemic violence and consent oppression on the subaltern are relevant postcolonial feminist tenets that enable us to contend in this paper that in patriarchal societies, subjugation is not only meted out to women by men, but women are equally benefiting on the system to oppress and silence men. The paper concludes that Spivak's question whether the subaltern can speak therefore demands that systems – patriarchy like matriarchy should adopt inclusive trends to gender and sex.

Keywords: *Matriarchy, Patriarchy, Postcolonial feminism, Subaltern, Violence*

Introduction

Over the years, the weight of gender and feminist research has centred on women's advocacy to embrace gender equity, women empowerment, and emancipation. In this regard, women have been considered victims of male domination struggling for liberation in patriarchal system that seems to be a global phenomenon. The relationship between sexes in postcolonial feminist discourse has qualified men as the oppressor and women, the oppressed because the latter is often considered vulnerable and victimized. In this perspective, people always see gender as men dominating women. However, a critical examination of the relationship between men and women in Nwabueze's plays reveals that men have been manipulated and dominated by women. In conformity with

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this view, Becker (1999) submits that “Women as well as men can oppress those in more vulnerable groups” (p. 25). In tandem with Becker’s perspective, Hanisch (1978) opines that “the term men’s liberation was derived from the term women’s liberation and thus insinuates that women have power over men. Its very name infers liberation from female domination and is therefore an inversion of facts as well as women’s liberation principles” (p. 72). In the same vein, Villar (1972) illustrates how women since the earliest times have manipulated and turned men into their slaves, thus playing the role of oppressors to men. She submits that, women let men work for them, think for them, and take on their responsibilities – in fact, they exploit them. Since men are strong, intelligent, and imaginative, while women are weak, unimaginative, and stupid, why isn’t men who exploit women? Does it imply that strength, intelligence, and imagination are not prerequisites for power but merely qualifications for slavery? Could it be that the world is not being ruled by experts but by beings who are not fit for anything else – by women? (p. 5). Thus, the woman subdues the man to commit his life to serving her, and like a slave owner, detests any move that man would make contrary to her authority. This justifies female dominance on the male.

Inasmuch as Nwabueze in his drama demonstrates the ability of the woman to challenge and deconstruct stereotypical representation of the woman and presents her as one who redefines herself as she evolves and seeks social change, this paper looks beyond the obvious consideration of gendering as solely a woman’s affair. It illustrates the fact that the male gender is equally, although hardly noticed, a victim of female domination. They also suffer marginalization, even though with some degree of philosophical equanimity, from women and hence, seek liberation. This is achieved through the interpretation of Nwabueze’s artful and aesthetic use of dramatic elements such as characterization, dialogue, action, plot, language, voice, setting, stage directions and stage craft illustrated in the plays under study in a bid to underscore the dominance of women over men.

Women Subordination of Men

Nwabueze is a contemporary male Nigerian playwright whose *A Parliament of Vultures*, *Fate of a Maiden*, and *The Dragon’s Funeral* justify that gender and feminism are concerns far from being the preoccupation of female playwrights. In these plays, he

unravels the relationship that exists between sexes, therefore, demonstrating the contention of this study premised on the fact that men are subordinated by women, and as well, struggle for liberation.

According to Cobuild (2010), subordination means “something else is less important than the other thing” (p. 1559). Considering that subordination is a central theme in feminist discourse, Beauvoir (1974) argues that because men view women as fundamentally different from themselves, women are reduced to the status of the second sex and hence subordinate (p. 56). Contrarily, men are also reduced to the second sex by women. It is against this backdrop that this study deviates from the obvious discourse of female subordination to demonstrate that male subordination by female has equally occupied centre stage, evident in the selected plays of Nwabueze.

In Nwabueze’s *Fate of a Maiden*, Mama is portrayed as an authoritative woman. She is a traditionalist who holds firm to her traditional beliefs, particularly as regards the birth of a child. She discourages anyone seeking medical solutions from a hospital, and firmly advocates the services of traditional practitioners. Aware of Caro’s condition of pregnancy, she stigmatizes the hospital services and authoritatively dictates where Uwakwe should take his wife to:

Mama: Tufia! Hospi-what? You want them to take that their notorious knife and cut her stomach open? No. She’ll not go there. They’ll take their sharp knife and cut her stomach like a festival goat. Uwakwe, you should take her to a traditional birth attendant.

Uwakwe: All right... (9)

It is apparent that Uwakwe’s encounter with Mama subjugates him to adopt her preference of taking his wife to a traditional birth attendant, thus exposing Uwakwe’s gullibility and lack of judgment. He lacks the will power and the ability to take his own decisions but allows himself to be manipulated by Mama. Mama does not seek his opinion, neither does she tell him as a proposal where his wife should be taken to. Rather, to show that she has authority over him, she demonstrates her power by her categorical “No. She’ll not go there” (9). Deutsch (1973) opines that, “[A] domineering matriarchal woman often achieves rule over her children by setting up a common ideology, thus gratifying her tendency to dominate” (p. 329). Deutsch’s assertion confirms Mama’s domineering prowess. She considers Uwakwe as her son and further silences his voice, which is glaring in Uwakwe’s simple response of “All right...” (2003, p. 9).

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Furthermore, the nurse's attitude towards Uwakwe at the hospital portrays her as an authoritative and domineering woman. Mindful of her profession as nurse as well as her status as a woman who should obviously be aware of the challenges of childbirth, she still goes ahead to demonstrate arrogance and insolence towards Uwakwe and his pregnant wife. This attitude of hers does not only prove her disrespect of professional ethics, but equally reveals her as a one who abuses the power given to her. In the play, we see this in the dialogue between the Nurse and Uwakwe:

Uwakwe: It's my wife. She has pains all over her stomach.

Nurse: I said you should stand outside there and wait for your turn. Do you think that all those people standing there are stupid?

Uwakwe: Please, Nurse, she's feeling great pains...

Nurse: Shut up! You people are very stubborn. I said you should go outside and wait for your turn. This place is a hospital, not your local bar!
(2003, pp. 11-12)

The dialogue above illustrates that Uwakwe is trying to be heard in a context that silences him, but looks more desperate and helpless, and instead of consoling and encouraging him, the nurse's insolence aggravates his predicament. Thus, the dialogue shows that men are equally subjected to various forms of marginalization from women. The man's marginal position as represented in the above dialogue makes him an object of pity. Despite his effort to speak as a form of resistance, he is silent.

To further enhance the level of female dominance in Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral*, the women look for all available means within their ability to put men under subjugation. To them, a physical confrontation with men would not be a better way to deal with them. Rather, they know they have their men in their palms and equally have what it takes to make them submissive to their women. Identifying a man's manhood as his Achilles heel, it is Nwugo's proposition that they (women) deal with men from that angle of their weakness. She proposes that:

Nwugo: We deny them the thing that gives them joy. Women are the givers of joy, the managers of the body of men. And when their manhood awakens it behaves as if it would penetrate a wall, sending their senses in a state of anomie. If we join together let me see the man that will withstand us for one market week. Unless that man is dead between his thighs. (2005, p. 21)

Nwugo's opinion highlights the female gender role as givers of joy to their husbands and managers or custodians of men's bodies. The women are aware of men's weaknesses especially when their appetite for sex is whetted, and as such use this as an advantage to put men under their control and authority and are quite sure that men would condescend and succumb to them. Busari (2017) is of the view that "Spousal abuse has even extended to the emotional realm, with disclosures evolving that many women now employ sexual deprivation as a means of punishing their men" (p. 69). Jick & Temeching (2016) corroborate the view above by submitting that, "The women decide to take the oath of sealed lips; to go on a sexual strike and also to starve their husbands until the latter brings pressure to bear on the fon" (p. 18). It is in this perspective that Chinweizu (1990) submits that "It is also said that when his penis stands up a man's brain takes French leave. Which is why a woman who wants to rule a man first gets his penis to stand up and salute her" (p. 15). This is one of the tools the female uses to control the male. It is female power's ultimate base. Thus, the fact that the women plan to deny their men sex as a weapon to subjugate them, shows the extent to which men suffer in the hands of women. They are rendered helpless and as a result fall prey to the demands of women.

The main item on the women's agenda is to empower themselves and take care of their own affairs. To support this view, Arizah (2019) asserts that, "Feminism is born because women are tired of being subordinated to everything. This has traditionally been called women's emancipation, where women demand equal rights in the political, intellectual, cultural and even literary fields" (p. 515). This explains why the women in Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral* express their unwillingness to remain subjugated to men. In an argument with Dike, her husband, Ikodie makes him to understand that the upcoming women's meeting has nothing to do with seeking equality with men. It is even more ironical that women claim not to seek equality with men, but plan meetings where they intend to run their own affairs. By dissociating themselves and holding meetings without the approval or presence of men and their husbands, portrays their ulterior motive of having men at the centre of their discussion. It is obvious that the meeting is to strategize the way forward for women to be in control of their affairs. Dike is suspicious of the women and predicts that such meetings would only go a long way to destroy the community:

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Ikodie: I am not throwing words at you. I just want you to understand that the meeting has nothing to do with seeking equality with men. It is concerned with empowering women to take care of their own affairs in a world that is not prepared to protect them.... don't you think that women have a right to hold meetings, a right to decide how to handle certain issues?

Dike: No! The place of the woman is in the home. It is the duty of the men who know better to decide for the women. This idea of women holding their own meeting without moderation by men will destroy this community. (2005, pp. 51-52)

It can be construed from the dialogue above that the women's meeting without the presence of men is their calculated move to plan how to manipulate, marginalize and subjugate the men, and Dike forecasts the consequences of their action on men and on the entire community. The fact that women challenge men, telling them that they have the right to hold meetings to make their own decisions, shows how prepared the women are to face the men. Thus, men suffer from the pressures of women and look forward to be liberated.

Female marginalization of the male is glaring in Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures*. This play is a comedy critiquing the corrupt unpatriotic Nigerian politicians who equate politics with stealing money because of greed. There is gross gender imbalance in the play with regards to the number of male and female politicians. However, Madam Omeaku, the only woman parliamentarian among the men, is a vulture just like her male counterparts. Through the allegorizing of these parliamentarians as vultures, Nwabueze unravels a portrait of a depreciating political system where morality and integrity have lost value. As the only female parliamentarian amongst men, Madam Omeaku adopts an authoritative, domineering, and arrogant attitude to consolidate her status in parliament. Madam Omeaku possesses traits of dominance, authority, subjugation, violence, and courage which are often associated with masculinity in a patriarchal context. She is a fearless woman who stops at nothing to challenge her husband, Mr. Omeaku, at the slightest opportunity. She belittles her husband in front of her daughter, Nkechi, simply because Mr. Omeaku is contemptuous about his daughter's dressing and lavish make-up. His contempt is since he wants her daughter to imbibe moral values, and not the immoral and care-free lifestyle of Madam Omeaku. In a bid to

suppress Mr. Omeaku's powers as a husband and father, she ridicules him to their daughter thus:

Madam: Things have changed. You're now the lucky daughter of an honourable member of parliament. This is the modern age. You have to take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way. I don't care what your father says about it. He can go and jump into the river if he likes. But what are such scenes worth? When he sparks, one thinks he'll bring down the heavens. But he just goes out, soaks himself in alcohol, and comes back fiddling sleepy at my wrapper. To him that's what makes a husband. (2000, p. 15)

Madam's vivid description of Mr. Omeaku shows that she has identified her husband's area of weakness and certainly knows how to deal with him. Referring to him as a coward who is incapable of withstanding the challenges of his home, implies Madam thinks she is more courageous than her husband. This gives her an edge over him as seen in the way she insults him, even in the presence of their daughter. Notwithstanding, Mr. Omeaku struggles to maintain his position as husband, father and head of his family by attempting to call both wife and daughter to order. But Madam's threats surpass Mr. Omeaku's strength:

Madam: (pointing menacingly at Omeaku) If you break that girl's leg, two of us shall put our legs into one pair of trousers.

Omeaku: I won't let this happen. I won't allow you to mess up this girl's life, like you messed up the life of our first daughter.

Madam: I'll teach my daughter how to survive in this modern society. I'll not allow you to pollute her future as you polluted mine for nearly thirty years. (2000, p. 18)

The dialogue above points to Madam Omeaku's courageous and domineering character, as she threatens to lock horns with Omeaku if he dares touches Nkechi. This is illustrated in the stage direction in the dialogue above where Madam points "menacingly at Omeaku." Omeaku's dream of seeing her daughter study to the level of a university graduate is punctured by Madam Omeaku who thinks authoritatively that there is no future as a university graduate, preferring she makes a name first and the rest should follow. Madam's disregard for Omeaku's decision over his daughter indicates that she is a domineering woman who does everything to put her husband at the subaltern position.

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Conflict between Madam Omeaku and Mr. Omeaku does not only end at home. It extends to Parliament where Madam exercises authority on her husband. She detests her husband following her around and infringing in her affairs, whether in politics or social life and does not hesitate to disgrace him in public. Suspicious of his wife's unfaithfulness and illicit extra-marital affair with men, especially Mr. Brown, Mr. Omeaku goes to the parliamentary house to complain about his wife's behaviour, but he is disgraced by his wife who refers to him as an "ordinary level" man. This mean description of Mr. Omeaku in public shows the extent to which Madam looks down on her husband. She despises and treats him with disrespect, scorn and arrogance, hence revealing her determination to reduce him to a subsidiary position. She asks the security guard to bundle him out of the parliamentary premises:

Omeaku: I've come to stop your marital infidelity...

Madam: This place is for advanced level discussion, not for ordinary level talks. Now, get out of here! (looks around) Security! Security!!

Security: (from outside) Yessum!

Madam: Come and drag this ordinary level man out of this place. You should know your duties. You shouldn't allow ordinary level people to disturb honourable members of parliament, no matter what they claim to be. Now, do your job or you get sacked right now! (2000, p. 41)

It can be understood here that Madam's attitude is triggered by her pride and quest for power and authority over her husband. The treatment she gives her husband places her at a superior position where she sees herself being in control. She sees herself as the "Self" and her husband, the "Other", which agrees with Al-Saidi's assertion that, "Politically as well as culturally the Self and the Other are represented as the colonizer and the colonized" (2014, p. 95). Moreover, the scenic display of the incident motivates her to prove to the public and other men in parliament that she is in control despite her biological disposition as a woman. This shows her determination to relegate her husband to the margin, thereby projecting her image as domineering and authoritative. Thus, men suffer under such women represented in the portrait of Madam Omeaku.

Furthermore, Madam Omeaku imposes herself in parliament through forms of arrogance and aggression. Her aggressive nature puts men like Dr. Parkers and Otobo

under subjugation because no matter how hard they try to contradict Madam's views, they are intimidated, threatened, and even physically assaulted by her. Dr. Parkers is very uncomfortable having Madam Omeaku as a member of parliament because of her social status and low academic pedigree. As such, he discourages every attempt and proposal made by the assembly to allow Madam to occupy strategic positions such as that of parliamentary secretary. To him, Madam is an irresponsible woman and operates a bar, and this, he thinks, runs down the reputation of the parliament. This provokes Madam, as she agitates and threatens thus:

Madam: (jumps up) Who runs a bar? Eeh, Dr. Parkers. Who are you referring to? Mention my name again and Ekwensu will break your nose. Yeye man!

Parkers: Mr. Chairman, I can share Parliament with all kinds of individuals, but I object to receiving unnecessary insults from a buffoon.

Madam: Who do you call bo-fool?

(Madam rushes to Dr. Parkers and holds him by the coat. He struggles to free himself. Jossy tries to stop her from tearing the coat, while Mr. Brown urges her on). (2000, pp. 45-46)

The dialogue above shows that Madam is a woman who is easily moved to tantrums and always ready to attack whenever she feels insulted. Also, as illustrated in the stage direction, the fact that she has the courage to jump up and hold Dr. Parkers by the coat portrays her as an aggressive woman, and of course domineering, because she believes that no man can challenge her. Chinweizu (1990) asserts that "The notion of male superiority is a noisy myth, a compensatory boast, born of men's acute consciousness of inferiority. Rather than being inferior to man, woman's superiority is incontestable" (p. 92). This implies that according to madam, she commands authority and must be accorded respect, even in parliament. Mr. Otobo is not spared by Madam Omeaku when the former insists the Chairman calls the latter to order, as he is fed up with her incessant insults, assaults, and lack of respect for fellow members of parliament. Angered by Otobo's interference, Madam extends her female chauvinistic attitude on him:

Madam: Call who to order? Don't let me undress you before the members of this parliament. Shameless idiot. If you have any shame at all, you should not talk when Madam Ho-ha is talking. (2000, p. 80)

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Madam's threats and insults suppress Otobo's view as he is relegated to silence, highlighting his total submission to the authority, marginalization and dominance of Madam Omeaku. Moreover, her language lacks decorum as she further pours her venom and aggression on Dr. Parkers:

Madam: (charges after him with the ferocity of an Alsatian dog) Who do you call gutter? Don't you know what it means to call a woman gutter? What is your reason for calling me gutter? Have you seen my pants before? If you don't take time, I'll ruin you in this country. I'll teach you a lesson so that next time you'll think again before calling a woman gutter. Beast of no imagination!

Parkers: Let go off me, Madam Omeaku.

Madam: If I don't leave you what will you do? (holds him more tightly)
It's your wife and your mother that you're calling gutter. Not Madam Ho-ha. (2000, p. 81)

The dialogue above depicts that Madam's aggressive behaviour metaphorizes female violence on males which is a common societal issue, although not often given much attention as in situations where the female is the victim. Dr. Parkers suffers physical violence meted out on him by Madam. This is glaring from the stage directions above where Madam's fierce action is compared to that of an Alsatian dog. Moreover, holding Parkers more tightly reveals Madam's fearlessness, while Parkers's failure to retaliate, probably on account of his moral integrity, can be mistaken for a weakness. No wonder, she is one of Madam's target whom she uses as a means to showcase her authority and dominance. Thus, Nwabueze uses Madam Omeaku to illustrate the fact that men are marginalized, oppressed, and put at the subaltern space by women.

It is important to note that Madam Omeaku uses her wealth and position as a politician to subdue Mr. Omeaku. The frequent domestic squabbles, public humiliations, insults, and assaults render Mr. Omeaku powerless in front of his wife who takes advantage to manifest her dominance on him. It is apparent that Madam has disrobed her husband of his supposed masculine functions and is now in command. This explains why he offers himself in total submission to her and now behaves more like a servant and errand boy than a husband, father, and family head. She dictates to him the way she pleases:

Madam: What is it?

Omeaku: I'm just from the wharf. The goods have arrived.

Madam: so? I think I've given instructions about them.

Omeaku: I thought you would like to know about it. I just rushed down here to tell you. Nothing else.

Madam: That's good. Now go and inspect the building in Victoria Island. They are putting up the tenth decking today, and I want it to be completed today. Put more men, if necessary.

Omeaku: All right. (rushes out) (2000, p. 102)

Omeaku's behaviour can also be linked to the fact that he is financially incapacitated and needs some financial back up, which only through submission, can be gotten from his wife. This highlights that some men submit to the marginalization of their wives because their wives are more financially buoyant than them, and to gain some degree of financial freedom, they succumb to their authoritative attitudes and allow themselves to be subjugated. Omeaku's tone and use of language demonstrates his humility and submissiveness to his wife. Mindful of this, Madam Omeaku is proud of the impact of her wealth on her husband, which has made him respect and treat her like a queen. She proudly tells Brown that:

Madam: Are you telling me? My husband is a typical example. Since he started cruising in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes, and living in a large estate, he has learnt to respect me. Now he treats me like a queen, and his family members believe I'm the best thing that happened to them. (2000, p. 102)

It can be construed here that her pride is not because her husband enjoys her wealth, but that she has used her wealth and materialism as paraphernalia to subjugate Omeaku and reduce him to total submission under her authority. Here, female power is brought to the limelight, and as Chinweizu (1990) asserts, "every man has as boss his wife, or his mother, or some other woman in his life, men may rule the world, but women rule the men who rule the world. Thus, contrary to appearances, woman is boss, the overall boss, of the world" (p. 12). Thus, Madam Omeaku uses her wealth, materialism, power and influence on silence and put Mr. Omeaku, who submits with tactful equanimity, at the subaltern space. Therefore, she celebrates the fact that she is the "Self" and her husband, the "Other". Thus, it is paradoxical that Omeaku painfully enjoys his wife's wealth, which illustrates the extent to which some men can go, and the sacrifices they make in relationships to validate female dominance.

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Conclusion

This study has looked beyond the obvious consideration of gender and feminism as solely a woman's affair, as it has illustrated the fact that the male gender is equally, although hardly noticed, a victim of female oppression who also suffers marginalization and seek liberation, even though with some degree of philosophical equanimity. The study has demonstrated that women are not the only victims of patriarchal domination. Men, too, in most societies suffer domination, oppression and silencing meted out by women. In addition, the study has showcased Nwabueze as a committed playwright who has objectively portrayed some of the challenges men encounter from women in his plays. The paper, however, concludes that complementarity between men and women will encourage better gender relations for the society to be a better place.

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