THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Overcoming Women Oppression: A Communal Approach in Ann Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*

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Abstract:

*This article explores possible ways of ending women oppression as depicted by Ann Iwuagwu in *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*. Drawing on the womanist literary theory in the analysis of both novels, the article takes the view that women alone cannot fight and win the battle against women oppression, the entire society has to be involved. The fight must therefore involve women at the individual and collective levels. The fight must also be supported by men if any meaningful progress and success will be achieved. This will involve men coming out their chauvinistic stereotypes and attitudes which take root in patriarchy as the dominant culture in the society. The article therefore concludes that for women to be free from oppression, women must fight at the individual level to achieve self-actualisation and be self-sufficient, women must support one another in the fight against women oppression in order to achieve collective freedom and stop oppressing one another, and men must also come out to be supportive of women in ways that allow women to freely express themselves and pursue personal achievements. Herein lie the communal approach which this article suggests to be a potent option for overcoming women oppression.*

Keywords: *Overcoming, women, oppression, patriarchy, communal, and womanism*

1. Introduction

Feminism has done so much over the years in its agitation for women's rights, women's freedom of individual expression and in bridging the age long gap between the traditional positions occupied by men and women in the society. The achievements so far are innumerable, ranging from the right to vote and be voted for; increased access to education; more equitable pay with men; the right of women to make individual decisions; the right to own property, to mention but a few. Although there is a remarkable departure from the society's negative attitude and improper behaviour towards women, women are still far from achieving total freedom. This is largely so because most societies are patriarchal in nature and this makes it difficult for women to achieve total success in their agitation. Ikpanor (2016) also observes this; however, he thinks that women have achieved more success in advance countries, with an otherwise different story in patriarchal societies of Africa (p. 204). This does not suggest that women in advance countries have attained total freedom, as patriarchy is a global culture.

Scholars have traced the history of feminism to the 19th and early 20th century to what is referred to as the First-Wave Feminism. In Nigeria, Ikpanor (2016) traces it to the 1929 Aba Women's Riot (p. 218). Ever since then, the world has seen the proliferation of different strands of feminism. With these developments, one would expect that women should be enjoying a total eradication of women oppression and subjugation but that is not the case till date. This goes to suggest that the fight against women oppression must take a different dimension; an all-inclusive approach that involves all members of the society, for optimal results. This can only be achieved when the society perceives or sees human relationship from a complementary point of view.

Daily life experiences suggest that human beings are not created to be self-sufficient; human relationships must depend on one another as binary complements to be able to achieve any meaningful development and progress in the society, even in the area of achieving absolute freedom for women. The implication of this is that women alone cannot fight and overcome women oppression; the fight must be fought and won at the individual and collective levels which comprises of collective efforts of women as one sex and women with men. This approach, which is core to womanism, takes into consideration, the wellbeing of the entire society, comprising of women, children and men. It is against this background that this article undertakes the explication of Ann Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom* to reveal first, that women still suffer oppression and secondly, that until overcoming women oppression is seen and accepted as a collective responsibility of the society, women oppression will continue to remain a problem in the society. This brief introduction is followed immediately by clarification of conceptual terms to allow for a clear understanding of key terms used in the article.

2. Clarification of Key Terms

2.1. Oppression

Oppression, according to Napikoski (2020) is 'the inequitable use of authority...Oppression is a type of injustice' (para. 1). It is the 'malicious or unjust...exercise of power...oppression refers to discrimination when the injustice does not target and may not directly afflict everyone in society but instead targets specific groups of people' (Wikipedia, 2020, para. 1). Women oppression, therefore, is the social act of subjugating women, and suppressing their right to personal expression of life. It involves taking away women's freedom and controlling their lives to suit men's agenda and by extension, that of the society. The oppression of women 'is based in the historical status of women as private property, and their unequal relationship in the family' (Workers World, 2020, para. 8). Consequently, women who are oppressed, as also portrayed in *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*, suffer deprivation, exploitation, abuse, devaluation, disregard of their personality, to mention but just a few.

2.2. Patriarchy

According to the *BBC English Dictionary*, 'patriarchy is a system in which men rather than women have all or most of the power and importance in a society or group' (Houndjo and Allagbe, 2018, p. 19). It is 'a form of sociological stratification that exalts the male gender over the female [one]' (Koussouhon et al., 2015, p. 315). In effect, 'patriarchy makes men regard women to be weak and inferior' (Houndjo and Allagbe, 2018, p. 19), it also subordinates the female to the male (Ibeku, 2015, p. 429-430). It based on the foregoing that patriarchy is blamed for women oppression, because of the position and right it gives to men over women in the society. Having had a concise but precise understanding of conceptual terms as applicable in this article, it is also important to have an understanding of the theory that guides the analysis of the issues discussed from the texts studied in this article.

3. Theoretical Framework

This article makes use of the womanist literary theory in its explication of the issues it discusses. Womanism is based on the idea that a woman's freedom is largely dependent on the freedom of the entire society. For this reason, the theory adopts a communal approach in its struggle for women's emancipation. It does so not necessarily by agitating for equal rights with men or by completely doing away with men, but by advocating for 'a tradition in which male-female partnership was an egalitarian affair' (Tally, n.d., p. 209). Thus, a womanist is a feminist who wants peace for self as well as for the society.

Womanism is thus defined as a 'concept or an ideal that contributes to resisting systems of domination, and insisting on the liberty, empowerment, self actualisation and self-determination of all people' (Shodhganaga, n.d, p. 50). The strength of womanism is 'that even as it treats within its focus everything that would engender the empowerment of women, it solicits the support and solidarity of every other person, be it male or female, in its great mission of addressing, attacking and solving women's issues' (Shodhganaga, n.d, p. 49). According Das (2014), womanism stems from a 'desire to take up gender issues without turning against men and to foster bonds between men and women' (p. 124).

This theory is considered suitable for this article because of the womanist ideals observable in *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*. Both novels take up current gender issues, identify men as oppressors of women and women as oppressors of themselves and show a drive towards fostering bonds between men and women by highlighting the themes of male and female support which form the subjects of the discourse of this article. The next section after the theoretical framework is a brief summary of the novels analysed in this article, given to aid familiarization with the core ideas discussed in the article.

4. Synopsis of Arrow of Destiny

Arrow of Destiny is a captivating story about women's perseverance, patience, courage and determination to overcome oppression in a suppressive world. The story is about Cynthia, a young orphan who is compelled by her circumstances to marry Idris in exchange for access to education. Life with Idris turns out to be tormenting because Cynthia is yet to give birth in their ten years of marriage. In spite of the troubles Cynthia goes through in Idris' hands, she patiently endures her suffering and perseveres through school despite Idris' attempts to stop her education. In the end, Cynthia is divorced. Outside of Idris' house, Cynthia meets Boma and women who help her in the actualisation of her dreams.

5. Synopsis of the Beautiful Road to Sodom

The Beautiful Road to Sodom is a story about the determination not to give up personal dreams. It is also a story that encourages sisterhood among women in the society. Barakemi is drugged by her so called 'friend', Joseph and raped. She gets pregnant from her encounter with Joseph but resolves not to allow her circumstance impede her personal progress in life and stand in the way of actualizing her dreams of becoming a lawyer. Later, her child is stolen by Mrs. Agnes but Eliza, helps her regain possession of her missing child. With these brief summaries of the novel, the article goes into proper explication of the texts to justify its findings.

6. Textual Analysis

6.1. Girl Child Education in *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*

Iwuagwu portrays the need for women to be educated in the society in *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*. She illustrates this through the characters of Cynthia and Barakemi.

In *Arrow of Destiny*, Iwuagwu (2011) portrays girl child education as a tool for women's liberation. Despite Cynthia's suffering and Idris' attempts to stop Cynthia from continuing her education, Cynthia, nonetheless determines not to give up.

Thus, she says, 'In all of that, I was focused on my education, I did not allow the marital problems to affect my studies. I knew that being educated was the only way out' (p. 65). Through this statement, Iwuagwu encourages focus among women in the fight against female oppression and quest for liberation. Like most women and feminists believe, Cynthia believes that education is the key that will break women free from the clusters of men's oppression and deprivation. Hence she is ready to endure the pain until she achieves her goal, thus she states hopefully that, 'I literally wore rags as clothes, but I was not bothered knowing that after graduating I would get a job and would be able to pay my bills as well as dress any way I desire' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p. 66). By this resolution, Iwuagwu makes bold to tell women that the fight for freedom comes with a heavy price that they must be determined to pay. Women must understand that breaking out comes with consequences that they must be ready shoulder in their quest for freedom and self-assertion. Iwuagwu's heroine understands this and resolves to venture into an uncertain fate with high hopes and determination to make it through. Consequently, Iwuagwu shows the importance of education to a woman when Cynthia finally graduates and gets a job as the Personal Assistant to the Minister for Internal Affairs. She therefore gains her financial freedom and a self-reliant status that would enable her harness her potentials as an individual, and not have to rely on unwilling and irresponsible men as when she has to rely on Idris. Clearly, Iwuagwu advocates for education for emancipation of the woman into becoming a liberated, self-assertive and economically independent person, who does not have to always live at the mercies of the men who can be unreliable. In the end, education happens to be the way out for Cynthia as Iwuagwu metaphorically describes in the following quotation by Cynthia, '...I knew that being educated was the only way out' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.65). Here, education is metaphorically represented and compared to a path.

Similarly, in *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*, Barakemi is determined not to be tied down by teenage pregnancy that unfortunately befalls her and interrupts her education. Reminiscing about her past, she remembers how 'she had been taught to be positive in life' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.79). She also recalls her earlier determination to 'win in life no matter what circumstances might befall her' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.79) and makes a firm resolution not to allow her condition distract her focus. Thus, she resolves, 'I'm going to read law still, come what may' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.79). Barakemi is able to make this resolution because of her preconceived dreams and determination to achieve them. Thus, Iwuagwu here is strongly recommending a positivistic attitude towards women's situation and a strong determination as back up, in order to overcome and succeed. Although no mention of Barakemi's further struggle to achieve her goal to be educated is made in the novel, her strong resolution is enough to pass the intended message across to readers and the women folk in general. Furthermore, Iwuagwu depicts female characters whose education makes them useful to themselves and their society in the characters of the Judge who presides over the court case between Barakemi and Mrs. Agnes and the nurses who deliver Barakemi of her child.

In both novels, Iwuagwu shows great concern for women's education and how she believes it can help break the woman free and help her find personal fulfilment and at the same time be able to contribute to the development of the society they are active members of. This perspective is palpable in both narratives as she maintains her focus in presenting the issue from the standpoint of the society, showing that the woman faces the most challenges that threaten her chances of gaining education because of the social and cultural configurations that are largely associated with their gender. She therefore outlines some of the challenges a woman encounters that threaten to hinder her educational pursuit but creates resilient characters that surmount the challenges to overcome. In this lies the womanist trait of self-sufficiency.

The next idea discusses female support for one another in the fight against women oppression and subjugation. Iwuagwu portrays the theme of female support to prove that a woman's individual effort is good but not enough in the fight against women oppression and subjugation. Their collective efforts and resolve cannot be overemphasized or underestimated.

6.2. Female Support in *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*

In *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom* Iwuagwu portrays several women who are supportive of their fellow women. These women include Mrs. Serah, Mrs. Franca, Eliza and Agatha. In *Arrow of Destiny*, this core womanist principle is illustrated in the character of Mrs. Serah, the strange woman who helps Cynthia out with her first menstrual experience and Mrs. Franca who helps Cynthia secure a job as Personal Assistant.

Mrs. Sera establishes a catering and fashion school called Back to School Institute. Cynthia observes that 'Serah had set it up with the aim of making women independent after youth service...' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.101). The motivation for the establishment of Mrs. Serah's school portrays the theme of female support. By this portrayal, the author seems to be encouraging female support among women which she evidently portrays as part of the efforts women can put in in fighting their oppression.

Mrs. Franca is also described by Cynthia as 'a wonderful woman...' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.103) who encourages 'hard work among the women folk' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.103). She is further described as a woman with 'the ability to spot signs

of diligence in a woman and would go to great length to ensure that her position benefits such a person.' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p. 103). True to Cynthia's description, Mrs. Franca uses her position, as the Minister of Internal Affairs, to appoint Cynthia as her personal assistant. Through this act of kindness to a fellow woman, Cynthia finally achieves her dreams of becoming a self-sufficient and independent woman. Her education pays off and Cynthia finds fulfilment in her job, all because of Mrs. Serah and Mrs. Franca's commitment to sisterhood among women. In *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*, Iwuagwu also depicts the theme of female support among women to show how important it is to the personal and collective welfare of women. This is illustrated in the character and attitude of Eliza, one of the nurses who witness the removal of Mrs. Agnes' womb. Eliza, who witnesses the theft of Barakemi's child, reports the case to the police and Mrs. Agnes is arrested for stealing Barakemi's child. 'Agnes was so ashamed of herself. She wondered how she could be disgraced on a day like that. The guests were also disappointed by such an act by their hostess' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.103).

The above portrays the theme of female support and reveals the author's disgust towards such an act by a woman towards a fellow woman. Creating such an embarrassing situation where Mrs. Agnes is publicly disgraced illustrates the depth of the author's disgust for such an act among women. Iwuagwu suggests the right character and attitude among women through her deliberate creation of Eliza and offers an alternative by way of proffering a solution to such women as Mrs. Agnes through Eliza's words, when she suggests that Mrs. Agnes 'could adopt a child rather than steal it from an innocent girl' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.99). Barakemi finds her baby because a fellow woman sympathizes with her and helps. Iwuagwu here uses Eliza's character to correct another woman's evil against a fellow woman, thereby making her point clear on the need for women to be supportive of one another.

The next theme: male support, suggests the obvious; that in spite of the efforts put in by women at the individual and collective levels against women oppression, there is still need for men to also support women in the fight against women oppression. Iwuagwu's portrayal suggests that this guarantees more success than if women decide to fight alone.

6.3. Male Support in *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*

Iwuagwu portrays several men who are supportive of women, these include Boma in *Arrow of Destiny*, who rescues Cynthia from the street when she is thrown out by Idris and Joseph in *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*, who rapes Barakemi but later acknowledges his wrong and becomes a source of emotional support to her.

In the course of Boma's relationship with Cynthia after he rescues her from the street, Boma falls in love with Cynthia but wonders if Cynthia would consider having a marital relationship with him after her bad experiences with Idris. Cynthia on the other hand does not think another marriage will be possible after her experiences with Idris. She says, 'remarrying never crossed my mind. For ten years, I had no child, which man would tolerate me? I don't even want to imagine that again' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.116). From this quotation, it is obvious that Cynthia has given up on the idea of marriage, considering that no man might tolerate a childless woman and marriage.

In spite of Cynthia's past experiences, fears and doubt, Boma is still willing to marry her and accept her, first, for the woman she is and not for what he can get out of her. He says to Cynthia, '...God gives children, I will forever stand by you. If God wills, he will give us children, if not, we shall together adopt children. I will never leave you for any reason in life. Only death can separate us...' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.122) These words depict male support. The quotation shows that Boma does not blame women for the childlessness in marriage and does not support maltreating them neither. The quotation also points to the new man Iwuagwu suggests as an ideal for women. Unlike Idris, Boma does not evaluate Cynthia's worth as a woman in her ability to bear children, but in her 'intelligence, character and beauty' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.118). Hence Boma marries Cynthia for love and not for childbearing (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.158). Cynthia's reaction in the following quotation reveals her happiness for Boma's support, she proclaims that 'there is everything to gain in loving Boma' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.163).

Consequently, Cynthia's comparison of Boma with Idris further gives a clue to her appreciation of Boma's support: 'I can't compare the two in any way. Living with Idris was like living with a monster. He...didn't appreciate the efforts of others...His mission was destruction...Living with Boma on the other hand is like living in heaven, and communing with the angels all day long' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.164). The use of the metaphors 'monster' and 'heaven' to compare her experiences with both men draws a demarcation that clearly shows the line between a woman's perception of oppression and freedom. Cynthia's comparison of Boma with Idris further reveals the author's use of the parallel technique to show a sharp distinction between behaviours that women find appealing and unappealing to the promotion of peaceful co-existence between both sexes.

Iwuagwu also portrays men supporting women in *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*. Joseph who rapes Barakemi and is responsible for her pregnancy suddenly feels guilty for the wrong he commits against Barakemi and seeks her forgiveness in true repentance. He thus apologizes to her, 'I was wrong when I deceived you...I've lost my peace...I've not lived like a normal human being...Forgive me...Barakemi' (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.55-56). Joseph's confession shows his acknowledgement of violence against women as inhumane, and his repentance and move for reconciliation depicts male support for women, especially for Barakemi who wishes that Joseph would accept responsibility for the condition he put her through. Barakemi's plea (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.39) to be allowed to inform Joseph of the pregnancy indicates the author's intent to promote peace between women and men. Joseph's move for forgiveness therefore serves as emotional support to Barakemi. Barakemi is saved from the fear and burden of single motherhood (Iwuagwu, 2011, p.68).

A critical examination of Iwuagwu's representation of male support in *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom* reveals Iwuagwu's womanist stance. The above analysis of Boma and Joseph's characters proves the womanist philosophy of 'inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness' (Das 2014, p. 124) in matters related to women's oppression. Iwuagwu in this regard takes on feminist issues with a serious focus on fostering bonds between men and women and

gravitating towards the progress of both sexes in the society. Both episodes in *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom* are suggestive of men to come out of their chauvinistic stereotype and stop inflicting pains on women. The episodes also reveal that women desire friendship with men and not enmity and hostility, that they are ready to put the painful past behind if only to embrace a happy and peaceful future that would guarantee freedom of personal and collective expression women's individuality. From this point of the article, a conclusion is drawn from the foregoing textual analysis to establish the article's position on its discourse.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that women oppression may not end until men begin to see oppression for the evil that it is and for the bad behaviour that it is and embrace the need to eradicate it from the society. This means that until men come out of their chauvinistic attitudes and stereotypes, women will continue to fight in vain for freedom. This tendency is evidently portrayed in the characters of Idris and Boma in *Arrow of Destiny* and in the character of Joseph in *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*. Cynthia never finds peace and freedom with Idris until she meets Boma, a man who sees and respects women in their right, for who they are. Boma is obviously a representation of an ideal; a man who sees women oppression as evil and a bad behaviour that should be eradicated. Barakemi also, does not accept Joseph back, until Joseph repents and sees violence against women as evil. Iwuagwu, thus uses the examples of Boma and Joseph to suggest male support as a possible panacea for overcoming women oppression and proper attitude and behaviour towards women.

Furthermore, Iwuagwu hints at women's individual efforts in the struggle for women's self-actualisation. This is illustrated by Cynthia's dogged pursuit for education which the author portrays as a tool for women liberation. Iwuagwu's representation also calls on women to embrace the spirit of sisterhood among themselves as they struggle in this male dominated and controlled world in her portrayal of female support among women. In women's individual and collective efforts and male support, therefore, lies the success of the fight against women oppression. Herein lies the communal approach of womanism; a tendency that proves to be potent in Iwuagwu's narratives: *Arrow of Destiny* and *The Beautiful Road to Sodom*.

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