STIGMATISATION OF WOMEN AS PROFESSIONAL THESPIANS: THE NIGERIAN NOLLYWOOD EXAMPLE

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Abstract
It is often said that if you teach a woman, you have taught the world. In many African societies, women’s roles in societal development have been downplayed overtime. The existence of women has been seen as a tool for environmental and material development but they are never appreciated for their roles in the society. Men have refused to understand the usefulness of women in the society, because the African culture portayed them as objects to be seen and not to be heard. This same situation transends to thespian profession: the theatre art practice that reflects the society. Women’s role in theatre arts has made them to be stigmatised, and branded with much social negativity. Instead of women to be appreciated for mirroring the society’s decadence, they are castigated. This paper examined Friedrich Engels theory of inequality and private property dominating cultural beliefs which necessitates the profound stigma found bedeviling the progress of women fold. It went further to look at how such stigma has been transferred into Thespianism and how it has as well been affecting the lives and roles of women despite their effort in making Nollywood what it is in Nigeria today.

Keywords: Theatre arts, nollywood, thespians, gender

Introduction
According to a historical account in the Bible, woman was made as man’s subordinate or complement in a dignified language. God from all indications did not make woman to be stressed but to build a formidable home front. The account in the scriptures showed that the woman was made to stay at home to take care of home affairs and to also care for the man after his sojourning up and down, to make ends meet. The saying then that the devil finds work for an idle hand affected the life the woman lived in the Garden of Eden. Eve, the first woman, was created to be given as wife to Adam though without definite role in that garden. So, she was to take instructions from the husband. Staying at home alone since there were no children or any extravagant home utilities to attend to in

the absence of her husband made her vulnerable. She remained agile throughout the day since no work was assigned to her to do. The historical account of the first family showed that the devil spent enough time with her and having understood her inexperience about the law guiding the garden, she fell into the devil’s deceptive antics, for which she persuaded the man to join her in rebellion against God. This issue between the first family and the devil in the garden kick-started stigmatisation of women fold, because many privileges were withdrawn from the woman. God noticed changes in them after they had both taken the forbidden fruit and the sin they committed was laid bare, and the first court was put in session with God being the judge. In the Bible book of Genesis, God judged:
I shall put enmity between you (devil) and the woman and between your seed (devil's followers) and her seed (the children of the woman). He (the woman's descendant) will crutch you (devil) in the head and you (the devil) will bruise him in the heel. And to the woman God said, I shall greatly increase the pain of your pregnancy; in birth pangs you will bring forth children and your craving will be for your husband, and he will dominate you (Chapter 3, Verses 15 and 16).

The critical analysis given to what happened then showed that the three committed the sin and they individually received a recompense for the role played in the process because Adam was also punished for being an accomplice. He was told in God's judgment that:

... cursed is the ground on your account. In pains you will eat its produce all the days of your life. And thorns and thistles it will grow for you, and you must eat the vegetation of the field' (Genesis Chapter 3, Verses 17, 18).

It has been noticed that man has capitalised on the phrase in God's judgment that says 'he (husband) will dominate you' (woman), to stigmatised women in all aspects of life. The problem over time shows that oral tradition, historical records like the one considered above and sociological studies have provided significant insights into how women's rights have been trampled upon. Much of women's aura or paranormal qualities have not been noticed and accorded necessary appreciation if compared with men's. The publicity on women activities had tilted overtime to negative behaviour in the society for which men were also guilty.

The overt and covert negativism spread about women have made them not to be recognised as a useful part of the society. A woman is recognised as a complement to carry out laborious job in the sight of man and function as a baby factory. Anything short of this is met with serious persecution that further stigmatises women. Beyani (1994) submits, after looking at the right of women in the society, that it is simply unacceptable to subject women to subordinate treatment that enslave them to men. According to her, human rights are about regulated civilised behaviour and conduct towards all human beings. This contribution reveals the second fiddle role given to women in the society and whose rights and privileges are enshrined in men before it can function. It is true that being a woman does not affect intellectual approach to matters in the society neither does it mean that being a man means having all the intellectual abilities in the world and thereby having the abilities to propose solution to all emerging societal problems. Women's right has been trampled upon for too long because they are considered to be objects to be seen but should never be heard. If all are equal before God, with different qualities that enable individuals to have varied approaches to issues, then there is need to consider the right of women in our society.

Some professions pitched women towards stigmatisation than others. Many men feel that some professions are not meant for serious women. This notion has affected the way the general public look at women found in performing art profession such as theatre arts and music. They have suffered serious stigmatisation as they are hardly accepted as progressive members of the society. Men label them as notorious, shameless, unchaste and a never-do-well in making homes. This paper, therefore, explores the process that cumulates into women stigmatisation with special consideration of thespianism.
Women Stigmatisation and the Emergent Views

Rights and stigmatisation are like two parallel lines that will never meet for any appreciable complement of each other. The group on the side of protecting the society looks at those on the side of complaint about stigma as misfits in the cycle of human existence. Stigma makes an individual to become restricted from exhibiting God’s intellectual endowment that would have benefited the larger society. In her bid to support the understanding of right that should have been enjoyed by women, Ilumoka (1994) opines that society is a collection of isolated autonomous individuals, free and equal, interacting in a marketplace. This submission shows that the equality of right should be felt in a normal society without giving consideration to gender as it were in the market where every marketer sold what he/she has to sell. In some climes in Africa, women are looked at as properties brought into a home to occupy space and used for the owner’s selfish interest without minding what constitutes the interest of the women. Sadly, some informed individuals in this 21’ century still parade and treat women with contempt. It was, therefore, concluded in one of Matcha Muche’s public lecture held in South Africa on African Development in 2014, that not all intellectuals are academic and not all academics are intellectual. This is as a result of the behavioural retrogression that has eaten deep into the fabrics of African inherited values. The unvalued treatments meted out to the women fold in all areas of life have inordinately made them vulnerable to men’s antics. Only few individual women and groups in this 21” century are making conscious effort to breaking free from such societal cultural mold that stigmatised their existence.

In her evaluation of the ordeal women are passing through in Africa, a former military governor’s wife to River State in Nigeria, Mohammed succinctly stated that, only women belonging to the aristocracy have been able to rise to greatness either in politics, administration or education. She concluded by adding that ordinary women were too busy raising children, cooking and going to the farm or market to make a name in life. The submission supports the stigmatisation that is on-going against the emancipation of women in the society. Okin (1979) opines, while evaluating how marriage contributed more to women’s problems in the society, that by marriage, husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection and cover she performs everything.

Though marriage is not aimed at caging a woman from exercising her potentials, the marriage creed has been misapplied by men to suppress the excellence of a woman in the society. The decadence in our society has often been put as figment of women’s creation because it is assumed that a recalcitrant child owes his/her bad attitudes to the mothers. An excellent child is the father’s, while a foolish child is the end product of the mother’s inefficiency at caring for the child. This is a popular parlance that often time governs the ill treatment women pass through both at home and in the society. Men have also forgotten that a god that clandestinely supports its worshippers creates problem of loyalty. When women are kept inactive to human matters, more problems are created than when they express their views. There is no doubt that some women are better and have intellectual acme than men but because their interventional outputs are restricted or not sourced for, their values may be shrouded within the charade of societal sycophants.

In the Bible, the congregator, King
Solomon said in Proverbs Chapter 12, Verse 4, that 'a capable wife is a crown to her husband, but the wife who acts shamefully is like rottenness in his bone'. In an explicit contextual analysis of this statement, one will ask, how can a capable or a foolish wife be measured. A person's capability can be determined when an individual is allowed to prove such ability through practice in an environment that enables the individual to exhibit endowed potentials. From this indication, women have been denied opportunities to perform and exhibit their potentials to the full. Only few individuals among them have gate crashed so as to be seen with their ability. Others that are also willing to follow in the stead of such leaders have been conditioned to lose their woman-values, a trend that has scared many from achieving their goals.

It has been observed that women are vulnerable to men's machinations because many of them were restricted from having contact with their immediate society. Overtime, the belief that women's education ends in kitchen, has created insurmountable problems for women and which in effect pitched their gender against the trends of civilisation. African culture does not impose too much restraint on women unlike the policy of colonisation. In the pre-colonial period, women were found in the social gatherings, market and even allowed to pay unsupervised visit to friends. They were given opportunities to become sectional leaders of groups, allowed to take part as chieftaincy title holders and became part of policy makers of their society. Many that did well for their people were not forgotten at death, such were later deified because their kinsmen believed they were actively supervising them from the great beyond.

Colonisation restrained women from getting involved in sociological development of the environment. Women have been further restricted from the right to secular education. Colonisation encouraged further stigmatisation of women when secular education was targeted only at men. Women were not included in the plans made for Africans because the school pupils who later enjoyed employment from the colonialists were all men. Few women were educated secularly and these few fought against stigmatisation from the outset. In her submission on discrimination against women, the chairperson of Better Life for Rural Women, Komo in (1996) observed that the United Nations' Conference on Women placed on the global agenda, since 1975, the issue of women's rights vis-à-vis those of men. Twenty years later, despite two other world conferences on the same matter, little was achieved in the implementation of the recommendations and resolutions of the conferences. Discrimination against women continued. Rewards for women's contribution at home and at the national levels were not commensurate to their efforts. In many places, women remained objects of ridicule and injustice in a male dominated world. No wonder it became necessary to convene another world conference. This submission insists that women encounter various processes of persecution and vicious attack before the attainment of secular education. They are relegated to the background because it is believed that they are not prepared to contribute to economic, social and political development of their nation. They are barred from taking part in policy making processes. Their potentials are meant to bear children and do manual activities when time permits that. Fafunwa (1974) looked at the role the traditional society assigned to women in Africa and concluded that their roles are to bear children, engage in house-keeping and the sustenance of agricultural activities.

It got to a point when stigmatisation of women became common the world over and many local and international functionaries
got involved in the process of emancipating women’s role. Steps were, therefore, taken to address the menace. In 1995, women all over the world converged in Beijing, China to address the stigmatisation against women at large. After the conference in Beijing, the Nigeria government responded positively. In 1997 the International Women’s Day (IWD) was held in Abuja to build on the resolution reached at the Beijing Conference. The IWD was tagged Beijing Platform for Action, and the focus was to execute:

- women and poverty alleviation
- campaign against violence toward womanhood
- sharing of power and decision making
- the fight against withdrawal of girl-child from school for marriage
- the involvement of women in economic structure and policies
- the survival and right to life of girl-child and education
- the women political advancement and media practice involvement.

The conference served as eye opener for uncounted problems of women, though there existed policies prior to that of 1997, which have not been able to address these noticeable problems. The jaw-jaw at the conference seemed to be the end to women’s problems but the report showed that the problem still persisted over-time. These said problems have transcended beyond control and they have made inroad into several professions. Having identified these problems, let us see how these same problems have affected women in Thespianism.

Friedrich Engels Theory of Inequality and Private Property

Friedrich Engels’ theory is of different dimension in the context of this paper. However, this theory is considered mainly to provide a background to where women’s problems emanated from. He theorised that gender inequality favoured women rather than men in the beginning of life. There was division of labour by sex, with men mainly responsible for procuring food and women were not subordinate to men. He further stated that private property existed in only a rudimentary form and consisted in only simple tools, utensils and weapons. Private properties were passed through the female and not the male. It was noted that monogamous marriage was not in existence then and both the male and the female enjoyed freedom to have many sex partners as they wished. The society became porous for illegitimate children as no man was sure of who the father of a child was. In contrast, women continued to give birth without the question about the motherhood and so property was passed on to children by the women. According to Engels in Haralambous, Holborn and Heald (2008):

it was during the period of barbarism that women suffered a ‘world-historic’ defeat. Men gained the upper hand when animals were domesticated and herded and became an important form of private property. Then meat and other animal products became crucial parts of the economy of early societies. Since men gained the responsibility for owning and controlling livestock, and were unwilling to allow this important property to be passed down the female line; through owning livestock men overthrew the dominance of women in the household (p.107).

From world’s historic defeat, men took over the control of virtually everything, beginning from homestead to the larger society. The men thenceforth wrestled the reins and women suffered degraded status, they were enthralled, became the men’s lust, and a mere instrument for breeding children. The
context shows that Engels belonged to the fold of stigma promoter against women as no anthropological evidence supported his theory. This history of early society is no longer plausible in the light that more researches made proved the existence of simple society as at the time under reference. If actually women wanted to fight the decision of men then, they would have gained total control because their children would have fought along with them to cement their mothers’ existence which also affected their right to life. Engels theory truly exposed the unappreciative tendencies of men to outwit the endurable women sagacity to contribute their quota in building an enviable society. Men, therefore, deliberately created complication in women’s life to portray them as irresponsible people in all sphere of human lives.

Who are Thespians?
The word Thespis was a leading Greek actor and writer of tragic plays. He was the first actor in Greek drama. He was often called the inventor of tragedy because he was recorded as the first person to stage a tragedy in the city of Athens. He engineered notable theatrical innovations which in effect changed the orientation of performers from choral tragedy through introduction of prologue and the internal speeches. In essence, he was the first to interweave choral song with an actor’s speeches. The word thespian is coined from the first actor, Thespis’ name. He was the first actor to ever speak alone on stage. In the 5th Century B.C.E., Thespis led a chorus to win the golden goat, which was like the Oscar of their time. Thessians are actors or actresses who take up careers in theatre play productions. This term is normally associated with those who work in dramatic theatre generally. The name was adopted in remembrance of the great actor Thespis. This is to accord respect to an individual. For instance, a senior actor, who is recognised for lifetime performance and contribution to theatre and cinema can be called a thespian.

The earliest origins of drama could be found in Athens where ancient hymns, called dithyrambs, were sung in honour of the gods Dionysus. These hymns were later adapted for choral processions in which participants dressed up in costumes and masks. Eventually, certain members of the chorus evolved special roles within the procession, but they were not yet actors in the way we would understand it (Griffith, 2010). The development of drama came later in 6th century BC, when the tyrant, Pisistratus, who then ruled the city, established a series of new public festivals. One of these, the city of Dionysia, which had a festival of entertainment that was held in honour of the god Dionysus, featured competitions in music, singing, dance and poetry. The most remarkable of all the winners was said to be a wandering bard called Thespis (Griffith, 2010). According to Greek tradition, between 534 and 535 BC, Thespis astounded audiences by leaping on the back of a wooden cart and reciting poetry as if he was the characters whose lines he was reading. This action of his made him the world’s first actor, and it is due to him that all theatre practitioners in the world refer to themselves as Thespian.

Discrimination Against Females in Thespianism (Theatre Practice).
Before the 17th century, play acting featured only the males. Women were conventionally portrayed by male actors in drags because the actual presence of a woman on stage was considered immoral. The stigmatisation fueled the dearth of female gender in theatre practice. Families prevented their female children and grown-ups from considering a career in theater practice. This was said to have been done for social reasons and what was called travesti (disguised) which prevailed in the field of performance. In
Theatre art history, record shows that *travesti* as an Italian term means the portrayal of a character in opera, play or ballet by a performer of the opposite sex. Though it may at times be called *travesty, traveti* or *en travesti* depending on sources, what is understood revealed that the practice has its origin from the French word referred to as pseudo which has been in practice from mid-19th century and have continued to be practised in the 21st century. *Travesti* roles, as mentioned in *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Foreign Terms in English* continued to be used in several types of context even after actresses became accepted on the stage. The popular British theatrical form of pantomime traditionally contains a role for a principal boy, a breeches role played by a young woman, and also one or more pantomime dames, female comic roles played by men. Breeches role were commonly practised in the formerly popular genre of Victorian burlesque.

According to Hermann (1989), the practice of barring female actor from stage performance dated back to 17th and 18th century French opera where it was traditional to use uncastrated male voices both for the hero and for malevolent female divinities and spirits. The portrayal of women by male dancers was very common in Renaissance court ballet and has continued into modern times, although it is primarily restricted to comic or malevolent female characters. The use of male dancers in a role that should have been played by female dancers flourished in ballet well into the 18th century. Hermann infers from the observation made by Abbe Richard who traveled to Rome in 1762 to observe first-hand the practice a travesty that female dancers are not permitted on stage in Rome. Substitutes for them were boys dressed as women and there was also a police ordinance that decreed they wore black bloomer. That made another French traveller who also made the same observation in form of an unanswerable question directed to himself that “what impression can one have of ballet in which the prima ballerina is a young man in disguise with artificial feminine curves?” as expressed by Hermann in one of the comment she made on the use of male actors in roles that should have been primarily played by female actors in a performance.

From all indications, it appears that males have dominated females in human endeavours for a long time. The question is: With the level of the so called civilization, has the trend been abated? The affirmative answer is No. This is because males have continued to impoverish the value of female gender the more. Let us take the issue of auditioning a play production for example: Featuring female actors goes with a lot of demands such as sexual molestation from the would-be-director of such production before females get roles. Some female actors are thrown out of their matrimonial homes for playing a role that is considered immoral from the outlook of the novice in the society while the male who partners the female in such role is left with his marriage intact. Another area of concern is the portrayal of female actors as wicked persons in the society in many African traditional film genres. For example, when a film features witches and wizards, it has been noticed that more females are auditioned to play the role of tormenting a society with their “witchery” than male “wizardry”. What I mean is this, where you have ten witches tormenting a town, you can find one male being an accomplice in the act. The question is, does it mean that majority of females are devil incarnate? This question summed up the outlook of male dominance of female which dovetailed into stigmatisation that has been on from time immemorial.

Stigmatisation and misconception have drummed up unsolvable problems for female actors. The rule of make belief
verisimilitude) in acting is another factor that creates fettered stigma for female actors. This is so because of many of the roles that some of them play to mirror the decadence in the society and which the society applies to assess the private lives of these actors. The use of film roles as yardstick to judge the female actor makes her an object for vilification. For this reason, many female actors are either divorced or remained unmarried because they are practising the profession of their choice. The common practice in circulation now is “use and dump”. Female artists have fallen prey to males’ antics of pretentious marriage in which after the material largesse from the female has been used to improve the living standard of such deceptive males, she is shown the way out for a new wife. The stigmatisation that started from Greek-Roman era in about 5th century when female actors were not permitted to take roles or they were stigmatised even for taking such theatrical roles have thus, been transferred to the female in contemporary theatre practice. It is a part of gender imbalance that is affecting female existence today the world over.

In order to create a plain level ground for new entrants into thespianism, it is advisable that government makes a law to protect the rights of female artists in order to free them from the manipulations of the male artists. There should be equal rights for the two genders to operate without one dominating the other. In Africa, men take undue advantage of tradition to victimise the women by throwing them out of their marital homes in order to marry other women. Though the constitutions of many countries in Africa including Nigeria, allow for such situation to be challenged in court, this is unreliable, because the court is dominated by men. Justice for women, therefore, becomes unattainable. Okoh (2002) airs her concern when she says that women suffered in silence from psychological violence and torture. Even if the neglected wife tries to sue her husband in court for adultery, she ends up disappointed, for all the magistrate courts and high courts in Nigeria are until very recently monopolized by men, who do not consider promiscuity as a crime. This shows the need for intensified effort to be made in educating the Nigerian populace about the right of women in the society. Education about gender equal rights should cut across all human strata, that is, from the grass-root level to the perceived elites who still demonstrate some level of ignorance. Profession should not be gendered to favour some groups in order to trample on the rights of others. Theories like that of Engels should be vehemently criticised for it not to have continuous adverse effects on the generations to come. The society needs some form of education to appreciate the toils of actresses in mirroring the ills perpetrated by societal dissidents and criminals. The courage to take some daunting roles should be appreciated with blissful encomium.

Women within and outside African continents have called a bluff of the situation, no matter how the beginning looks like, to attain stardom. We have the likes of Omotola Jolade, Chioma Chukwuka, Genevieve Nnaji, Mercy Johnson, Rita Owoh, Rita Dominic, Stephanie Okereke, Stella Damascus, Funke Akindele, Tonto Dike, Elvon Nelson and others too numerous to list have defied the people’s reaction to thrive as Thespians. The same trend has been done in other parts of the world and records have it that, the like of Stella Adler (1901-1992), Ethel Berrymore (1879-1969), Georgiama Drew (1856-1893), Jessica Tandy (1909-1994), Katharine Hepburn (1907-2003), Pepper Jay (1949), Saira Banu (1944), Meryl Streep (1949), Judi Dench (1934) and Kate Winslet (1975) made spirited effort to write their names in gold on the plaque of thespianism. Stigmatisation should stop and there is need to go back to examine how each of us has knowingly or
unknowingly contributed to the menace of stigmatisation against women. Having examined and discovered this at any stages of life, may it be at our various homes and in the larger society, there is the need for us to have a rethink.

Conclusion

This paper has helped us to see how the problem of stigmatisation against women began with the sin Adam and Eve committed in the Garden of Eden. This sin degenerated into what women suffer today as the consequence of their inability to resist the deception of Satan. Men have used the statement made in the judgment that God passed against the sin man and woman committed. The issue of domination of men on women is the full consequence of the curse passed on to the woman that 'he shall dominate you.' To worsen the situation, Friedrich Engels' theory provided reasons for women stigmatisation and also gave tacit approval to the need for it to continue unabated. He said that women succeeded in dominating men in the past but men struggled to gain freedom and total control of societal activities.

It was also discovered that women have undergone serious vilification from men who have turned them to objects to be seen and not to be heard. In spite of men's oppression of women whom they batter and cheat sexually as well as divorce, the existing laws have prevented women from fighting for a just course to dignify them as married women. The same stigmatisation rear its ugly head in the career choice of women. Majority of women have been turned into baby making factory so that they can remain in-doors. The few that have fought their ways into high profile jobs that are elitists are often stigmatised with accusation of indecency from men who saw them as rivals in the same career. Thespian practitioners are in the forefront of the said vilification. This started when travesti was in the offing and males were made to take over the roles meant for female actors. Since then, the persecution against women became global and they were pitched against making any considerable impact on the society. Things are so bad that female actors are considered as a set of people with audacious beliefs. Nobody is willing to have them as friends not to even talk about marrying any of them as a wife.

The paper looked at several contributions of those who are in the forefront in the fight for the emancipation and restoration of women's right. The Beijing Conference of 1995 was examined as well as the subsequent conferences such as that which was held in Nigeria in 1997 to uphold the decision reached at the Beijing Conference. Suggestions were made on how to improve the content of the constitutions of different countries where women are not allowed to exercise their human rights freely. Equal opportunities should be given to both genders to have freedom to choose what is good for them without any stringent bottleneck.

References


