

DEPICTIONS OF THE POWER OF WOMEN AND BETRAYAL IN KUNLE AFOLAYAN'S *ANIKULAPO*

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Abstract

Against previous opinions of writers, some women in the precolonial African society were forces to be reckoned with in terms of their spiritual and intellectual powers. These women's achievements, including the Oyo women, were not limited to their homes but their strength and intelligence in reaction to social and personal issues, remain indelible. The portrayal of this idea is not limited to the written texts but is also projected through the Nigerian movie industry. This study employs New Historicism in the discussion and analysis of how a man discovers the power of women and meets his doom after he betrays three powerful and influential *Oyo Ile* women in the Old Oyo Empire, on different occasions. This study acknowledges that although betrayal can be suffered by one gender from another, the power of African women stands and injustice or betrayal meted against them attracts fatal consequences as depicted in the selected movie, *Anikulapo*.

Keywords: *Anikulapo*, Kunle Afolayan, *Oyo Ile*, Nigerian movie Industry

Introduction

Literary writers and the Nigerian movie industry have enjoyed a form of synergy in conveying realities in society, either on historical, current or future events. Majorly, the thematic interests have been on areas like politics, gender, religion and education. The focus on

gender and the place of women in society by some movie producers has attracted a conclusion by some people, that the Nigerian movie industry remains an extension of the Nigerian literary tradition, in the conveyance of creative opinions on societal realities.

The Old Oyo Empire, which covered the present day eastern Benin, and western Nigeria (the South Western zone and the Central zone of Northern Nigeria), originated in the 13th century and grew to become the largest Yoruba speaking state. The kingdom had its capital situated at *Oyo Ile* (*Oyo Katunga*, *Oyo Oro* or *Old Oyo*). Also, in this society, some women have been depicted as essential parts of the family and society at large. That is, they performed functions like encouraging the king during difficult periods, defending him from evil attacks, and tutoring him on what to eat, touch or what to avoid, and they ensured the growth and stability of the empire. In Akorede (2005), she enumerates and explains some powerful roles that were reserved for women in the indigenous Yoruba society. These positions accorded them much power and respect in the society. These roles are *Yeye Oba*: the king's mother, *Iya-kere*, who oversaw the palace and king's properties, *Iyamode*, who was in charge of the burial rites or Mausoleum of dead Oyo Kings, *Iya-fin-iku*, *Iya Naso* and *Iya Monari*, who were leaders in the cult of Sango (the god of thunder). The *Iyamode* was a highly powerful and respected woman, whom the Alaafin could kneel before and *Iya-kere* placed the crown on the head of the king during his coronation *Yoruba Renaissance* (2021). Also, Jegede (2007) explains the *Igbatiti* (hitting the calabash) and *Yungba* (melodious) as important roles of the wives of current and previous kings of Oyo. She asserts that these forms of poetry celebrate the heroic achievement of the monarch:

Like their male counterparts, the women poets also approach history longitudinally by naming the king's progenitors in chronological order. The poets move from one past monarch to the other, till they get to the incumbent...In recreating the history of the king's enthronement, the accompanying conspiracy and the eventual victory of Alaafin, the women use images from

the domestic sphere to validate their claim. (290)

Furthermore, Obi-Nwosu (2020) addresses previous misconceptions on the place of women in Igbo society. This includes previous submissions and opinions on levirate marriage, inheritance, religion and politics. Also, he posits that to some extent, some women in the precolonial Igbo society (umuada), were relevant for judicial roles. They treated minor issues concerning women, although this was subordinate to the male jury. A much rarer court of women, which involved an initiation, was the Umu-Okpu and due to its intolerance for corruption, it served as a supreme court against the king's or elders' verdicts (8). In addition, in some communities, some women were members of the masquerade cult.

A Review of Texts on African Female Heroism

Some literary texts, have justified the importance of women as mothers in the family and some influential ones as leaders in society. For instance, in Ahmed Yerima's *Queen Amina*, he portrays how the matriarch attains leadership and employs her monarchical power to torment and punish the opposite gender in different ways. Queen Amina makes this decision to rule as a means of revenging how she is abused without getting help from the patriarchal society and the gruesome murder of her loved ones. After ascending the throne, she declared the conscription of all able bodied men in her kingdom into the military and community service (29). She ensures that they are more engaged in battles and renders them useless as husbands. Also, she commands them to give a share of the battle' spoils to widows and the poor in the kingdom (29). In addition, she renews her powers with the blood of the bravest male warrior of the enemies, after having sexual intercourse with him (25). Apart from preserving her invincibility, she uses this to ridicule the man who raped her when she was younger as well as all men in the kingdom and beyond. Hence, the character represents a politically empowered woman in the precolonial African society.

Also, J.P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* is a depiction of how women fearlessly assert their familial and societal power through a revolution against patriarchal hegemony. After the women were

informed of the unequal sharing ratio for the oil company money and the ban placed on the rearing of goats by women (2), Koko leads the women out of the community, leaving the men to take care of the house and feel the pain that they feel as women (19). Eventually, the men realise their mistakes, agree to use part of the oil compensation for the construction of the community school, treat the women's infections and lift the ban on goat rearing by women compensating them with some items (59-60). Hence, through the women's neglect of their domestic responsibilities and migration from their community for another to protest against the men's selfishness, the playwright aptly describes women's intelligence and courage in an African society. Similarly, Femi Osofisan describes how powerful women were and can be, through the characters of Moremi and Titubi. He draws to Moremi's myth to explain how women were wise, powerful and altruistic in ancient Yoruba society and uses this as a propeller for Titubi, the modern day female hero who achieves a similar feat in her society. When her mother dissuades her from attempting to act as a government spy against the erring *Agbekoya*, she replies thus:

TITUBI: I will do it, mama. One woman did it before.

ALHAJA: A woman?

TITUBI: Moremi. Have you forgotten?

Also, in the course of the story, Osofisan relays the Moremi myth as Titubi goes into a reverie (31-39). These two characters are depictions of women's heroism in the African society. Furthermore, Ahmed Yerima, in *Queen Amina*, portrays how the legendary Queen Amina ascends the throne in Zaria and becomes authoritarian against the men, who had for long believed in patriarchy in the kingdom. Similarly, one of the morals conveyed in Bunmi Julius-Adeoye's *Ajarat* is the possibility of women getting educationally accomplished in a patriarchal northern society in Nigeria, where females are deprived of formal education and forced into marriage at very young ages. Lami Alhassan, a medical doctor, returns to her village, to "make women and girls more healthy" (16). In addition, she serves as a mentor towards Ajarat's academic excellence. Lami

decides to secure her a scholarship for Ajarat due to the latter's poor background. Lami Alhassan is conversant with the dangers of forced marriage in her society and she preaches against it (33). Also, her speech at the end of the play reveals the thrust of the work (45). In addition, in Vincent Egbuson's *Womandela*, he conveys the possibility of women becoming Presidents in African countries. Irrespective of the oppositions and challenges faced by women in African society, Woma becomes the first female President of Namuh and not long after, her mentee, Yamara, also assumes this honourable and powerful post as a widow (429).

In essence, the reviewed texts are portrayals of the assertion by African authors that African women are smart and capable of exercising power, strength and making outstanding achievements in the family and society, even for the benefit of others. This study explains the importance of women beyond the home, in the precolonial African society, through a film and not written text.

Synopsis of Kunle Afolayan's *Anikulapo*

The movie begins with the *egungun* festival at Oyo Ile, and viewers are introduced to a sojourner and weaver from Gbogun, Saro, who is later accommodated and employed by Awarun, an influential female chief and businesswoman in the kingdom (00:12:59). Awarun, a divorcee, becomes Saro's lover and after working for her for a while, she empowers Saro financially in order for him to set up and practise his profession in the kingdom (00:19:56, 00:30:38, 00:31:21). The young man becomes a renowned weaver and maintains his secret affair with Awarun, until he meets and falls in love with the king's fourth wife and the royal's favourite, Arolake, on his visit to the palace. Arolake and Saro embark on a secret love affair, against Awarun's warning. After Arolake reveals that she was forced into marrying the king whom she never loved at the age of fifteen (01:02:38), the lovers decide to elope (01:07:04). Unfortunately for them, Omowunmi, a princess, who is interested in Saro, discovers this plan and angrily reveals the secret at the palace, after confronting Arolake and accusing her of snatching her beloved (01h:08m:53s). Shortly afterwards, Saro is summoned to the palace and sentenced to

death at *Igbo Ifeyinti*, the funeral site for corpses in the old Oyo Kingdom. Arolake, who has been watching the scene in hiding, runs to Saro's aid in the forest, only to discover that he is dead (01:14:19). In the morning, Arolake wakes up and flees to hide, when she sees that the *Akala* bird is approaching Saro's corpse (01:14:56). The bird is believed to possess the mystical power of life and death, depending on the nature and time of the individual's death. When it resuscitates Saro, the latter reveals the cause of his death to it. On knowing this, the bird begins to chastise Saro but before it leaves Saro to die, Arolake approaches the bird, hits it and puts its small gourd, which possesses the mystical power of life (01:15:22). After this, they hurriedly leave and after some days' journey in the forest, they are saved by a hunter, who takes them to his house at *Ojumo* Town (01:26:25). On getting to the man's home, they discover that his son is lying lifeless and Arolake gives the small gourd to Saro, after explaining its use. Saro revives Akin, the hunter's son (01:26:47 – 01:30:42), and this changes the story of the two lovers. They attract the love and appreciation of royalties and the commoners from far and near. Due to this feat, Saro bags the name *Anikulapo*: he who has death in his pouch (01:32:44). Along the line, Saro rapes and impregnates their housemaid, Omowon and this saddens Arolake, who is still childless (01:47:20 – 01:52:55). In his reaction, Saro, advises Arolake that it is not a big deal and confesses that he impregnated the maid in order to pave way for Arolake's fruitfulness as well as ensure his lineage's continuity (01:53:29 – 01:54:55). After some years, Saro has become renowned and richer with two more wives – Omowon and Bimpe – and their children. Also, the childless Arolake has become a laughing stock among the wives (01:56:32 – 01:57:49). Polygamy in the home and the co-wives' rudeness towards Arolake have lessened the love between Saro and Arolake. One day, the king summons Saro to the palace, in order for him to resuscitate the royal heir, Aremu. On getting there, the greedy Saro agrees to raise the dead prince, with the condition that he would be offered the hand of the princess in marriage (02:01:39 – 02:04:31). Initially, the king objects vehemently to this and Anikulapo departs arrogantly and confidently from the palace, after insulting and mocking the king

(02:03:48 ?02:06:04). Meanwhile, before he gets home, Arolake has heard about her husband's interest in the princess, Ajoke, through the gossips of her husband's slaves (02:06:58-02:08:02). She angrily packs out and leaves for an unknown destination (02:08:35 ? 02:09:02). When Saro gets home, he is shocked to know of Arolake's departure (02:10:27-52). Before he recovers from this news, he receives the king's messenger, who informs him that the king has agreed to his earlier proposal (02h: 11m: 03s). On his arrival at the palace, Saro is unable to revive the prince after three attempts (02:12:40 ?02:14:10). He then realises that Arolake had emptied his gourd of its magical powdery substance for resuscitating the dead. He rues his actions against his wife (02:14:27 ?02:52), and he is sentenced to death by the king. The movie ends with the moral on how excessive pride and betrayal can result in a powerful man's downfall, just as it happened to Saro (02:16:22). The *Akala* bird approaches and resuscitates him the second time, but the viewers are left to make their conclusions. (02:16:31 ?02:16:38)

Depictions of Betrayal in *Anikulapo*

Awarun, a divorcee, makes Saro her secret lover and feeds him far better than her other employees. After a while, she gets Saro a house and establishes him in his weaving business. She also refers him to people (00:31:55). Saro becomes famous, gets more customers and begins to make good money. One day, Saro discovers that Awarun has another lover, Akano, who is a rich man from another town (00:34:59). This confirms what a man has told him earlier that Awarun uses and dumps young men at will. This reveals Awarun as a betrayer who devours younger men and uses her influence in the society to express her independence and disloyalty to men. Also, this instance depicts her as a symbol of immoral female leaders in society. After this stage, Saro feels betrayed, insulted and angry but is appeased when his lover informs him of a royal contract that she gets for him. Saro is summoned at the palace to supply woven materials to the queens and princesses in the palace. There, he meets and falls in love with the king's fourth and favourite wife, Arolake. (00:48:18, 00:48:43) The two begin a secret love affair and Awarun gets to know

about this. This instance of betrayal in the movie depicts Saro's betrayal of Awarun and Arolake's betrayal of the king. This also implies that Saro, a welcomed stranger in the town turns around to betray the head of the kingdom. Although, Awarun's affair with Saro is a secret one which due to their huge age difference cannot result in marriage, this discovery by Awarun attracts no consequence but a warning to Saro to stay clear of the lady to avoid being killed by the king (59:53-01:00:08). She does not feel betrayed because she also a professional in using and dumping of younger men. However, Saro and Arolake continue with this affair until Princess Omowunmi, who has an interest in Saro discovers this secret, confronts and insults Arolake as a husband snatcher and also reveals the secret. That is, Saro does not know that the princess is interested in him and the latter decides to destroy him and Arolake for making her lose that man that she love. Furthermore, the king discovers that a man that has been welcomed and accommodated in the town has decided to share a woman with him. He feels bitter and betrayed by both Saro and Arolake. After Saro has been beaten to the palace amidst people's song of mockery "Saro, *Odale*" (Saro, Betrayer), the addresses Saro before the whole town:

King: Saro, o ma se o. (Saro, what a pity!)

Eyin ode Oyo.... (Oyo people...)

King: ...Odale re (This is a betrayer). Oyo gba onile o gbalejo (Oyo welcomes everyone from far and wide)...A si faye gba o. O si wa mu igi sosoro ti n be lowo re, o fi gun ode Oyo loju(We did welcome you. You dare had the guts to pierce the eye of Oyo with a sharp stick. Oba alade o ni fowo pada mi loju, kama ti wa sope iwo idin lasanlasan (Not even a king dares try this with me. But you, a stranger had the guts to.)...Ta n bi o? (Who sired you?) Oba I daba... Ase lobaa pa (A king does not suggest...A king decrees). Eyin eso (You guards), e mu alaare yii, (Take this criminal) e sé idajo re b'oti to ati b'oti ye. (Take this criminal and treat him accordingly.) (01:10:49 ?01:11:42)

After this pronouncement, Saro is taken away by the king's guards and beaten mercilessly, amid insulting songs, towards *Igbo Igbeyin* ? the town's cemetery .(01:11:42-01:12:27) Shortly after the guards abandon the unconscious Saro at the destination, Arolake rescues the latter from being killed by the *Akala* bird and they journey for days in the forest and settle at *Ojumo* Town. Arolake's decision to stand by a hopeless man instead of remaining in opulence depicts a reaction to the earlier betrayal which she suffered from her society and father: The king forcing her into marriage, just as the tradition permits and her father acceding to this. It portrays her as a woman who knows and expresses her right in a patriarchal society. Along the line, Arolake discovers that her maid, Omowon, has been impregnated by her loving husband. This is an instance of betrayal which leaves Arolake downcast. This depicts Saro as a very selfish being who only cares about the continuity of his lineage rather than the happiness of his benefactor. He refuses to check his wives' excesses against Arolake, the source of his success, but he puts the last nail in his coffin by hitting Arolake, after she peacefully confronts him on her experiences in the home. This portrays Saro as arrogant and patriarchal. In reaction to this, Arolake decides to destroy the man who she has made, by destroying the magical gourd, which is Saro's source of power. This leads to Saro's destruction, humiliation and second death. Through this decision, Arolake retaliates the injustice she has been subjected to in her home and betrays Saro's confidentiality of their little secret. However, it can be stated that Arolake's eventual barrenness, frustration and loneliness are fate's punishment for her betraying the king's trust. That is, she was not directly punished by her offender, but life later dealt with her through Saro, Omowon and Adebimpe. This is Afolayan's way of portraying the fact that in life, one might escape a direct punishment from one's offender, but life has a way of using other people and circumstances as Karma for one. In addition, Saro's eventual destruction can rightly be defined as the consequence of his betraying Awarun, a benefactor, when he decides to dump her for Arolake.

The Power of Women in *Anikulapo*

The study acknowledges that “New Historicism” was coined by Stephen Greenblatt. The theory prioritizes history and discusses the social, political and economic state of the writer's society or in a literary work. Scholars like Kelly Griffith (2002) and Lois Tyson (2006) opine that in New Historicism, literary texts are cultural artefacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, and the web of social meanings operating in the time and place in which the text was written. And they can do so because the literary text is itself part of the interplay of discourses, a thread in the dynamic web of social meaning. Historical events are viewed by New Historicists not as facts to be documented but as literary texts to be read by people in order to help us speculate about how human cultures, at various historical moments have made sense of themselves and their world. New Historicists scrutinise the relationship of literature with the power structures of society. Also, readers are influenced by their cultures; hence no objective reading of a work is possible. In addition, the theory focuses not only on the textuality of historical records but the historical essence of texts. In Kunle Afolayan's *Anikulapo*, the setting of the movie is the old Oyo Empire, which existed between the 13th and 17th century. During this period, the immediate family of the king (Aláàfin) was considered as very special and this includes the wives (oloris), princesses and the king's mother (Ìyá Oba). In the movie, characters like Arolake and Omowunmi fall into this category. In addition, Awarun, is presented as a powerful woman who sits in council with the king, although her office is not mentioned. One can place her in the position of one of the most powerful women that existed during this period: Iyamode, Iyakerere, and so on. Two of these women at one time or the other, assist Saro but he ends up disappointing them. Awarun, a divorcee, who is reputed dating younger men develops an interest in and commences an affair with Saro. When the latter discovers her interest in another man, he confronts her but she boldly replies him thus:

Awarun: Aaah! O maa go o. (You're such a fool.)
 Lo l'enu re yanganyangan lo n bere oun t'oo sonu
 lowo mi. (You dare open your filthy mouth to

ask me such a question.)....Saro, ko jabo lenu mi. Mo so ni. (It wasn't a mistake. I meant what I said.) Wo mi. Kii wa se pe enu re se yanganyangan nikan soso. o pin yinkin (It stinks) Enu re n run. O ke...Wo mi daadaa, arakara ti m ba da. Mo da gbe ni. (Whatever I do, no one questions). Mo si lee soun koun to wu mi peleniken (I can also do whatever I like with anyone I please). Ti baba nla baba enikan o le bimi. (And no one dares questions me). Wa naa, eh eh Saro...abi mo polowo de waju re...Ah! Saro, maa gun gi koja ori ewe o (Don't bite off more than you can chew). So o gbo? You hear me? Ko te jeje. Ise ni o se. (Tread carefully and face your work) (00:37:52-00:39:35)

These words attest to Awarun's power, boldness and status in the kingdom. She enjoys these, as long as she does not offend royalty. This is why she warns Saro against his secret affair with Queen Arolake. (00:31:21). Courtesy of Awarun's influence, Saro is transformed into a comfortable businessman and house owner, from a hopeless sojourner who one sees at the beginning of the movie. In addition to this, Awarun is a character portraying women in industry in the precolonial African society. She feeds her employees and dictates who gets what. Also, a young princess, Omowunmi, a character who depicts envy and desperation, is instrumental to Saro's downfall at Oyo Ile.

Furthermore, when it seems like Saro's case is hopeless, Arolake revives his hope. That is, Arolake exhibits wisdom and courage by sneaking after the king's guards in order to save Saro in the forest and by attacking the *Akala* bird in order to possess the magical gourd. Arolake's handling of the gourd to Saro at *Ojumo* Town depicts her handling to Saro a key to prestige and stardom (01:26:47 – 01:30:42). Hence, Saro is opportune to start afresh a new and better life. Ironically, the same character who facilitates Saro's

greatness is also responsible for his eventual downfall. Hence, Arolake's character and actions convey that an African woman would sacrifice anything for love but she also possesses the power to rescind on her decisions.

Conclusion

This paper has been a depiction of the intelligence, influence of the female gender and the consequences of betrayal especially against women, in the African society. Also, it is a response to the negative depictions by some earlier authors on the place of women in the pre-colonial African society. This study has depicted how Kunle Afolayan's *Anikulapo* aptly portrays the power and ability of women, either as royalty or commoners, in the pre-colonial Yoruba society and this applies to the current age and society. Therefore, the selected movie is a profeminist work, which agrees with the notion of the law of Karma for all betrayers, irrespective of the gender and also portrays the familial and societal importance of women as well as the consequences of undermining the worth of the female gender, irrespective of the age.

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