

## **Beyond the Bondage of Marriage: Ideological Inconsistencies in Olu Dolapo Ojediran's Miss! Mrs!! Ms!!!**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the misrepresentation of feminist goals in the African socio-cultural milieu beyond the thematic depth of Olu Dolapo Ojediran's Miss! Mrs!! Ms!!!. Marriage is culturally viewed as a partnership built on love and mutual respect. However, in many African societies, deep-rooted socio-cultural norms foster marital inequalities that disproportionately affect women, increasing their vulnerability to intimate partner abuse. These inequalities manifest through restricted decision-making power, gender-based expectations, and legal constraints, creating an imbalance of power within relationships. The theme of the play deals with the level injustice meted out on African women in their marital homes. Through a close analysis of the play, this study shows that although the play acknowledges the existence of women subordination and the need for women liberation, there is also a case of ideological inconsistencies. The portrayal of the female protagonist in the play show extremity and this fosters negative misconceptions about feminism. Therefore, this study recommends that there is a need for a reevaluation of popular misconceptions about feminism, advocating for a more inclusive and a more culturally rooted understanding of African feminist ideals.*

**Keywords:** Masculinity, Womanism, Patriarchy, Marriage, Subjugation, Gender Roles, Feminism and Gynism .

## **Introduction**

Over the years, marriage has been a subject of scrutiny and debate within feminist discourse. In fact, marriage has long been a patriarchal institution that has served to subjugate women and constrain their rights. This is probably why Ann Oakley says that the liberation of women will be very difficult to achieve without dismantling the institution of marriage. In her argument that it is crucial to take drastic measures towards the liberation of women, Oakley says:

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First, the housewife role must be abolished. Oakley rejects less radical solutions such as payments for housework, which, she argues, will simply reinforce the woman equals housewife equation. Second, the family as it now stands must be abolished. This proposal follows from the first since the housewife and mother roles are part and parcel of the same thing. Abolishing the family will also serve to break the circle of daughter learning her role from mother, son learning his role from his father. Third, the sexual division of labour must be eradicated in all areas of social life (Oakley, 1975, 129).

As seen from Oakley's perspective, the family unit was established to perpetuate women's subjugation and enslavement to men. Therefore, the subjugation of women is rooted in traditional cultures where patriarchy is a social structure and paternal authority governs the family or clan, and lineage is traced through the male lineage. Throughout history, the oppression and marginalization of women is evident across various cultures, including African societies. Nevertheless, African women activists, scholars, artists, and critics have indigenized radical feminist theory, introducing concepts that express women's oppression and liberation within an African framework. Notable examples include "Womanism", "STIWANISM," and "Motherism."

Therefore, any comprehensive exploration of women's plight in African society must recognize that the portrayal of gender in Nigerian theatre has undergone transformations. It has transitioned from a radical feminist stance to a more culturally rooted womanist perspective. Consequently, it is crucial for Nigerian female playwrights to address gender inequality effectively, aiming for an equitable and just society that fosters both human and national development. Nkiruka Akaenyi says that "Playwrights have harnessed the influential aspect of drama throughout history to offer insightful observations on societal events, leading to positive transformations in human lives and their surroundings" (Akaenyi, 2024, 73). Nigerian playwrights should, therefore, embrace an approach that demonstrates the need for mutual existence of men and women, aiming to foster a society where both genders live in harmony, with equal opportunity for self-realization.

In this context, Nigerian female writers and scholars who empathize with the challenges faced by Nigerian women and employ their creative works to empower them should also consider the cultural context of their endeavors.

This study examines the issue of marital subjugation and the need for women's emancipation in Olu Dolapo's play, *Miss! Mrs!! Ms!!!* from the perspectives of feminism. Through a close

reading of this play and a critical examination of the theoretical frameworks of feminism and womanism, this study explores how these two schools of thought approach the issue of oppression against married women, and how they differ in their understanding of women's liberation.

By exploring the nuances of Olu Dolapo's *Miss! Mrs!! Ms!!!* and the perspectives of feminism and womanism, this study also hopes to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of marital subjugation and women's agency.

As societal paradigms continue to evolve, so do the complex dynamics surrounding relationships, particularly within the realm of family. The purpose of this study is to illuminate and unravel the ideological inconsistencies in Olu Dolapo Ojediran's *Miss! Mrs!! Ms!!!*, probing the artistic work to uncover layers of conflicting beliefs, principles, or ideas associated with feminism. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between literature and ideology, shedding light on the tensions and contradictions inherent in the feminist ideology.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to redefine existing perceptions of feminism within literary discourse. As we navigate through the carefully crafted play, our intention is to not only reveal the nuances of ideological inconsistencies but also to prompt broader discussions about the societal constructs influencing these portrayals.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminism is a social and political movement that seeks equality and liberation for women. Marilyn French says that:

Feminism is the only serious, coherent and universal philosophy that offers an alternative to patriarchal thinking and structures.... Feminists believe that women are human beings, that the two sexes are (at least) equal in all significant ways, and that this equality must be publicly recognized. They believe that qualities traditionally associated with women - the feminine principle – are (at least) equal in value to that associated with men – masculine principle – and that this equality must be publicly recognized (French, 1985, 19).

Feminism, through its different approaches and positions, aims to eliminate any kind of oppression experienced by women. It is a complex and multifaceted movement that has evolved over time and encompasses a wide range of perspectives and approaches.

The history of feminism can be traced back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries when women started clamoring for their rights. The first wave of feminism, spanning from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, primarily aimed at achieving women's right to vote and securing legal equality. The second wave, which gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, expanded its focus to include issues like reproductive freedom, discrimination in the workplace, and violence against women. The third wave, beginning in the 1990s and continuing today, adopts a more intersectional perspective, recognizing how gender is interwoven with factors such as race, class, and sexuality in shaping women's diverse experiences. According to Osita Ezenwanebe:

Bondage persists only when the enslaved is not aware of his predicament; or being aware, lacks the potentials for freedom. Critical appraisal of women in modern society shows they are oppressed, marginalized and subdued to an ignoble position visa-avis the men. The quest for freedom which informs the women liberation movements in the West in early 1960s is codified as Feminism in literary circles. It is an ideology in art and life which exposes the oppression of women and articulates ways for their freedom (Ezenwanebe, 2008, 186).

While feminism is a welcome ideology in Africa, women activists, scholars, artists, and critics have adapted the theory to fit the African context, developing concepts such as "Womanism" by Mary Kolawole, "STIWANISM" by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, and "Motherism" by Catherine Acholonu and others to articulate women's oppression and liberation within an African framework. In Olu Dolapo's *Miss! Mrs!! Ms!!!*, feminist concepts of women's oppression and emancipation are used to examine how male ego contributes to gender crises, as the female character strives to resist the oppression and marginalization of her gender. The main argument of this study is that social role differentiation is a breeding ground for gender crises in modern society.

In 1975, during a conference in Wellesley, women from Third World countries challenged the intellectual frameworks and social perspectives of Euro-American feminists. In response, they introduced the concept of "womanism" as a comprehensive ideology aimed at the liberation of African women within the context of African cultural values. Since then, African female writers have expressed resistance to gender-based oppression while advocating for forms of emancipation that remain rooted in African social and cultural contexts. This has been reflected in various frameworks such as "Motherism", "Nego-feminism," and "STIWANISM". Clenora Hudson weems is of the opinion that "African womanism is an ideology created and designed

for all women of African descent, grounded in African culture, and focused on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of African women” (288).

Womanism is the direct opposite of Western Feminism, and its aim is to position culture as the site for critical transformation, rather than necessarily focusing on men. It seeks an evaluation of men and women that emphasizes complementarity instead of equality of the sexes, recognizing that neither men nor women can exist in isolation. Although gender differences are accepted, it calls for a redefinition of social roles in light of the changes in modern society. Womanism calls for equity and fairness in the relationship between men and women to build a society where both genders coexist in equal dignity, mutual respect, and self-actualization. It protests and seeks freedom from all forms of social and cultural oppression of African women and offers ways for them to assert their dignity and gain self-actualization. Mary Kolawole's definition of an African womanist summarizes the ideology well. Kolawole says that “Any African woman who has the consciousness to situate the struggle within African cultural realities by working for a total and robust self-retrieval of the African woman is an African or African womanist (Kolawole 1999, 34).

Therefore, African women writers and gender scholars who empathize with the struggles of African women and use their works to free them in accordance with cultural reality are referred to as womanists. Nigerian womanists express African women's aspirations for liberation, establish connections between men and women for harmonious coexistence, and scrutinize oppressive cultural customs and norms to achieve total socio-cultural transformation.

The challenges experienced by women in Nigeria are made more complex due to extensive political corruption and the weakening of social structures, which hinder progress in the efforts of Nigerian womanists. Regrettably, the term "feminism" has taken on a negative connotation in Nigeria.

Numerous people who empathize with women's concerns, are hesitant to use their artistic works to support the cause of gender equality. This ambivalence leads to misunderstandings and confusion in works that deal with gender inequality.

This study interrogates such misconceptions and encourage Nigerian artists to collaboratively address gender imbalances using appropriate styles to achieve the desired result, which is to establish mutual coexistence between men and women.

## **Feminism, Womanism, Gynism, and Beyond: Unraveling the Feminist Discourse in Female Playwrights' Works**

Whether it be feminism, womanism, gynism, Stiwanism or femalism, the common thread within the philosophical framework of female playwrights is the advancement of women's circumstances. According to Emmanuel Eboh "the four currents have one and same theme, but different perspectives. They have one philosophy which is varying existential backgrounds and lived experiences. The root of inequality between the two genders and the long but sporadic struggle is the point (Eboh, 1999, 12).

The main issue presented here emphasizes that various scholars hold diverse perspectives while exploring the reasons behind the unequal portrayal of the female sex compared to its male counterpart. The interpretation of feminism varies among individuals based on factors such as race, culture, and historical background. For instance, in Nigeria, feminism is often understood as the women's endeavor to achieve equality with men or secure access to positions of power. However, Julie Okoh provides clarification by stating that "Feminism is more than that. It is first and foremost a collective term for systems of beliefs and theories that pay special attention to women's rights and women's position in culture and society. On a personal level, it is a state's mind, a way of thinking, an alternate perspective from which to understand the world" (Okoh, 2012, 12). Okoh's stance highlighted here suggests that feminism involves a woman recognizing a distortion in her social status. To address this perceived injustice, the woman takes steps toward autonomy, self-assertion, and empowerment. This viewpoint is echoed by Berg, who argues that feminism revolves around:

...the freedom (for a woman) to decide her own destiny: freedom from sex-determined roles: freedom from society's oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action. Feminism demands for the acceptance of woman's right to individual conscience and judgement. It postulates that women's essential worth stems from their common humanity and does not depend on the common relationships of her life (Berg, 1851, 24).

In corroboration, Taylor says "that feminism is a protest against the institutionalized injustice perpetrated by men, as a group and advocates the elimination of that injustice by challenging the various structures of authority or power that legitimize male prerogatives in a given society". (Taylor, 1851, 43). This is similar to Bressler's view of feminism as "an ideological movement that seeks to change the degrading views of women so that all women will realize

that they are not a non-significant other, but that each woman is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man” (Bressler, 2007, 144).

Feminism, in essence, is a movement aiming to free women from the constraints of patriarchy. It underscores both political activism and ideological commitment. The feminist perspective involves scrutinizing and evaluating the status of women in societies, revealing the complex oppression experienced by women at the hands of men. In other words, according to Okoh, “feminist activities are propelled by the impetus to dismantle all systems that perpetuate inequity and justify violence, generate exclusion and reinforce domination” (Okoh, 2012, 8).

Certain female authors choose to distance themselves from feminism, despite the evident presence of feminist themes in their works. Writers such as Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ, and others have consciously distanced themselves from the feminist label for personal reasons. Ogundipe-Leslie insightfully links this reluctance or outright rejection to the successful intimidation of African women by men, particularly on matters related to women's emancipation and feminist ideals. In her view “Male ridicule, aggression and backlash have resulted in making women apologetic and have given the term ‘feminist’ a bad name. Yet nothing could be more feminist than the writings of these women writers in their concern for and deep understanding of the experiences and fate of women in society” (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, 64). According to Wollstonecraft “A feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs, which remain negated and unsatisfied and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change in the social, economic and political order” (Wollstonecraft, 1792, 8).

Feminists advocate for the elimination of all types of oppression that hinder the establishment of a fair socio-economic system. This system is envisioned to support women's involvement in national development and the global pursuit of economic solidarity. According to Eboh “a feminist is a white woman, who fights for women’s cause. Her black counterpart is a womanist, a coinage of Alice Walker indicating that a black woman activist is not a separatist. On the contrary, she is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female alike (Eboh, 1999, 13).

Yet, when taking into account the disparities in the experiences of white women and black women, Eboh contends that “the black woman activist in African continent is a gynist while the black woman in the African Diaspora is a womanist” (Eboh, 1999, 13). Further, Eboh explains that their dissatisfaction to the appendage status accorded women by the usual practice



of having to name and define her always in terms of man, gave rise to the term gynist' (Eboh, 1999, 13). She says "...in Womanism, for instance, there is man and in femalism, male is there too. This has necessitated the coinage of the terminology, gynism, otherwise, we do not have much against the philosophy of womanism as well as Chioma Opara's femalism. (Eboh, 1999, 14).

At this juncture, it is important to emphasize that the evolution of modernist feminism is generally divided into three distinct "waves," each addressing different dimensions of feminist advocacy. The first wave, emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, concentrated primarily on the suffrage of women and access to education. The second wave, which unfolded between the 1960s and 1980s, tackled broader legal and cultural inequalities. The third wave, beginning in the late 1980s and extending into the early 2000s, both expanded upon and critiqued the perceived limitations of the second wave.

Across these waves, diverse strands of feminist thought developed, each reflecting unique ideological perspectives. These include Liberal feminism, Marxist/Socialist feminism, Psychoanalytic feminism, Radical feminism, Black feminism, Womanism, Ecofeminism, Postcolonial feminism, Poststructural feminism, and Postmodern feminism.

In essence, this study is based on feminist theory. The artistic expressions in the play under examination will undergo feminist scrutiny, considering the cumulative portrayals of women derived from it. This approach will allow an examination of the playwright's dedication to the feminist cause.

### **Beyond the quest for Women Liberation: Ideological conflicts in Olu Dolapo's Miss! Mrs! Ms**

*Olu Dolapo's Miss! Mrs! Ms* is a play that revolves around men's continuous molestation of their female partners all in a bid to satisfy their sexual urges. As the play opens, Modunke, a University graduate, the heroine and a victim of marital rape and abuse is introduced to us. She is on a hospital bed, being attended to by a medical doctor as a result of the physical injuries she sustained from her husband's brutality. The hopelessness of Modunke's situation is powerfully dramatized, as she presents us with a bizarre account of man's insensitivity and subjugation of women. She says:

Modunke: Listen? (She tries to sit agitatedly) He behaved like a beast, an animal in human skin. He pounced on me; I thought it was the usual beating. I was beaten. He opened my two legs wider like



someone in the labour room. He pushed me down, mounted on me and penetrated me like an animal. I cried, I shouted, I became motionless. I think I passed out after a long scream with no help. All I could hear was the cry of my daughter, far away from this earth (now crying). Doctor, please, take me away, far away from him (2).

The use of physical violence by Modunke's husband is aimed at subduing his wife. Modunke is not only beaten up by her husband, but she is also raped. This illustrates the travails that millions of African women must undergo in their matrimonial homes. During one of their nightmarish encounters, her husband refuses to apologize to Modunke after assaulting her. Rather, he proudly boasts to her, that he will not be punished by law enforcement agents, even when he is arrested. True to his words, he was eventually released. The attitude of these law enforcement agents underlies their complicit role in perpetuating gender inequality. It can be interpreted here, as a reinforcement of the oppression that has pervaded the life of African women. Marital rape, especially when initiated by the man is not seen as a criminal offence. It is however, believed that the woman is the one at fault, since it is one of her social responsibilities to satisfy her husband in bed. Modunke aptly captures the cultural position on marital rape when she says that:

Modunke: In a lawless country? In a country where rape is not an offence. A boy rapes a girl, she is at fault, man rapes a girl, she is to be blamed. A husband forcefully has intercourse with the wife; he is performing the husband role...marital obligation. The woman refuses sex, she is tagged the bad wife. She is branded the woman who sends her husband on an adultery mission.... (3-4).

Therefore, domestic violence is sanctioned by the social structures and institutions in Africa. Ezenwanebe rightly says that "An African man can hardly accept to be in the wrong before his wife or in a case between him and this wife" (Ezenwanebe 2011, 270) Although Nigeria has endorsed multiple international human rights agreements, the enforcement of laws safeguarding women from domestic violence remains insufficient. The legal system frequently views domestic violence as a private family issue, and law enforcement agencies are often hesitant to get involved. This absence of institutional support is vividly illustrated in the experiences of female characters in this play, where both the police and community leaders not only fail to protect women from abuse but also tend to uphold patriarchal values. The main reason for Modunke's situation in her matrimonial home is because of her husband's traditionalism.

Even though Modunke's husband never put up appearances in the play, but we are made to understand that he is such an irresponsible person, a rapist and a cheat/ womanizer. Modunke,

talks about the blissful moments in their marriage which was cut short by her husband's sudden change in behavior. Soon, she discovers that he has extra-marital affairs, even to the extent of trying to seduce Radeyo, his sister-in-law. Aloysius Orjinta says that "Adultery by a woman had mortal consequences whereas for a man it is not a crime, except if committed with a married woman" (Orjinta, 2011, 13).

Despite all odds, Mama advises Modunke to remain with her husband. Modunke listens to her mother, believing that her husband will change. Modunke's initial decision to conform to the cultural expectations of her society and accept a subordinate role within the family is because she does not want to destroy her reputation in her society which considers it an abomination for a married woman to desert her matrimonial home or reject her traditional duties. According to the cultural dictates of her society, a woman must learn to endure the suffering in her matrimonial home or will be faced with sanctions. Modunke says, "I was scared. I was terrified; I wanted to be a good woman to him. I wanted to keep our shame, his dignity, keep the vow (2).

The high level of tolerance of violence especially among married African women is rooted in cultural and religious norms. Such an attitude leads to under reporting of the incidence of gender-based violence in society. Titilayo Ayotunde, Olusola Akintoye and Adefunke Ehindero observe that "women who are victims of gender-based violence are often reluctant to report certain forms of violence such as rape because of fear and social stigma associated with such events". (Ayotunde Akintoye and Ehindero, 2014, 6420). In a similar vein, Nkiruka Akaenyi says that:

There exists an atmosphere of constant fear of sexual molestation and rape seems to become an integral aspect of every woman's existence. This pervasive fear to a great extent imposes limitations on their ability to move freely, interact socially with others, shape their worldview, and even express themselves verbally. Women and girls find themselves constantly relying on their intuition and instincts to navigate social situations (Akaenyi 2024, 150)

However, Modunke knows where to draw the line. She refuses to swallow the bitter pill and divorces her husband. Modunke is paradigmatic of the oppressed housewife as she bitterly laments of the absence of marital bliss throughout several years of marriage.

Modunke is a brave female figure who symbolizes the marginalized woman in society—one who lacks a voice but refuses to be silenced or confined by limitations. Her strong will inspires hope for a better future among women. Her resistance is clear, direct, and unwavering.

She does not stop there but reiterates her vision of the kind of marital life she would like to live. She wants to be an equal partner to her husband and not his slave.

Olu Dolapo has, in unison with other women playwrights represents on stage, the painful experiences women encounter. Mama's uncritical acceptance of culture is an ultimate reification of the old order. In the face of what may be regarded as a threat to her daughter's life, Mama has no option but to support Modunke's rejection of marriage. She says to her neighbour "Modunke's mind is made up. I can't convince her. I don't want to lose my child as well..." (27). The playwright condemns in succinct terms the arbitrariness of the gender roles, which shape and are shaped by marriage, lock women within the gender stereotypes that simultaneously justify and maintain their oppression. Modunke refuses to go under as a result of her husband's callousness. Therefore, Modunke is ready for the tough struggle for equality. She chooses to divorce her husband instead of feeling desolate, bewailing her predicament to everyone. Olu'Dolapo reechoes the idea in her play that the power of any woman to end abuse lies within her. Courage is required to take action. The moment of choice is the moment of transition from a situation of powerlessness to a state of absolute control over one's life. The moment Modunke stopped indulging in self-pity, her emancipation begins.

Wife abuse in Olu'Dolapo's play moves to psychological trauma. This violence is so brutal and it springs from men's pathological urge to dominate, denying the woman all her rights. Olu Dolapo through the breakdown of Modunke's marriage makes a statement that the social role demarcation is not capable of supporting a healthy spousal relation in modern society. Modunke refuses to accept her husband's plea, when he returns to her, so that she wouldn't go through the torture of a botched marriage the second time. Modunke's revolt is therefore a reaction to his choice of life, the choice that forbids integrating women in the scheme of affairs. She does not only divorce her husband, Modunke also vows to stay unmarried. The play highlights the place of education in the tough struggle against abusive marriages.

From the womanist perspective, Olu' Dolapo Ojediran portrays empowered women as unsuccessful in marriage, depicting them as individuals who are unable to maintain a lasting marriage due to their supposed incapacity to tolerate, and withstand challenges, resulting in negative outcomes for their family. Modunke's decision to divorce her husband and stay unmarried as a means of liberating women from oppression contradicts the principles of African feminism or womanism, which show support for the traditional African family. This approach to women's liberation is met with doubt and uncertainty by African audiences, who

do not view divorce as the solution to ending women's oppression. In fact, Modunke's reaction is considered as tantamount to the very problems that menfolk are accused of perpetrating against women. Her impatience and intolerance fail to connect with the African audience, who yearn for strong, relatable female characters. This is because divorce is considered unacceptable in the African society. The traditional African family is always looked upon as the smallest unit of the society. This could be linked to the perception of feminism as a derogatory term by many in Africa. To make matters worse, Modunke's decision to divorce her husband reinforces the biased notion of patriarchy that empowered women disrupt the social order, rather than being an essential part of it.

## Conclusion

The ideological inconsistencies embedded in *Olu Dolapo Ojedirin's Miss! Mrs! Ms!* truly confirms that some African female playwrights, whether intentionally or inadvertently, ends up with the distortion of some feminist principles in their works. Consequently, this study emphasizes that there is a need for African playwrights to reevaluate their perspectives on gender issues in their literary writings since the goal of African feminism or womanism is to build a harmonious relationship where men and women co-exist as equal partners in progress.

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