

Africana Womanism in Osonye Tess Onwueme's Tell It to Women: An Epic Drama for Women^(*)

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Abstract

Africana womanism is a terminology coined in the late 1980s by Clenora Hudson-Weems, the African American theorist and critic, to create a distinct paradigm for African women that expresses their demands, desires and unique experiences. Unlike western feminism, black feminism and Alice Walker's womanism, Africana womanism prioritizes the racial plight over those of class and gender. For her new ideology, Hudson-Weems formulates eighteen characteristics that are: self-naming, self-definition, family centeredness, wholeness, role flexibility, adaptability, authenticity, genuine sisterhood, struggling with males against oppression, male compatibility, recognition, ambition, nurturing, strength, respect, respect for elders, mothering and spirituality. One of the main aims of this paper is to present a theoretical analysis of Hudson-Weems's theory and its characteristics emphasizing the plausibility of the new ideology in the African context. Another important aim is to analyze Osonye Tess Onwueme's play *Tell it to Women: An Epic Drama for Women* from an Africana womanist perspective. The paper also aims to analyze only twelve of Africana womanism characteristics that are the most salient ones exhibited by the female characters of Onwueme's play. The selected characteristics are: self-naming, self-definition, family centeredness, wholeness, role flexibility, adaptability, authenticity, genuine sisterhood, male compatibility, respect for elders, mothering and spirituality.

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المخلص

المراوية الأفريقية هو مصطلح صاغته الناقدة الأفريقية الأمريكية وصاحبة النظريات كلينورا هادسون ويمز لتصنع نموذجا فريدا للنساء الأفريقيات الذي يعبر عن احتياجاتهم وتجاربهم الفريدة. على العكس من الحركة النسائية الغربية والحركة النسائية السوداء والمراوية لأليس ووكر قامت هادسون ويمز في نظريتها المراوية الأفريقية بتفضيل قضية العرق على قضايا الطبقة والنوع. وقد صاغت هادسون ويمز ثمانى عشرة خصيصة لنظريتها الجديدة؛ وهي: تسمية الذات، تعريف الذات، التمرکز حول الأسرة، الكمال، مرونة الأدوار، التكيف، الأصالة، الأختية الأصيلة، النضال مع الرجل ضد الاضطهاد، التوافق مع الرجل، التقدير، الطموح، التربية، القوة، الاحترام، احترام كبار السن، الأمومة، والروحانية.

أحد أهم أهداف هذا البحث هو تحليل نظرية هادسون ويمز "المراوية الأفريقية" وخصائصها، مع التركيز على ملاءمة تطبيق تلك النظرية فى البيئة الأفريقية. وثمة هدف آخر مهم لهذا البحث هو تحليل مسرحية "أخبروها للنساء: مسرحية ملحمية للنساء" للكاتبة النيجيرية اوسون تيس أونويم طبقا لنظرية هادسون ويمز "المراوية الأفريقية". كما يهدف البحث إلى تطبيق اثنتي عشرة خصيصة فقط من النظرية على الشخصيات النسائية بالمسرحية لأنها الأكثر وضوحا.

الكلمات المفتاحية

المراوية الأفريقية – كلينورا هادسون ويمز – أوسون تيس أونويم – أخبروها للنساء

Introduction

The main concern of many African and African American critics and theorists is to analyze African female literature according to a theoretical framework applicable to African female unique experience that varies drastically from that of the white female. Evaluating African literary works from a feminist perspective has proved to be misleading simply because western feminism serves an agenda that is inapplicable to black women whose main plight is not that of sexism. Therefore, some black critics and theorists like Patricia Hill Collins (1948), Angela Davis (1944), bell hooks (1952) and Alice Walker (1944) have formulated ideologies of a specific paradigm such as black feminism and womanism that reveals the distinct experiences, demands, and desires of black African women. An outstanding figure of this group of critics is Clenora Hudson-Weems (1945) who coined the term Africana womanism for all women of African descent.

This paper aims to explicate Africana womanism with very specific reference to the eighteen characteristics of this ideology as formulated by Clenora Hudson-Weems. The paper also aims to analyze Osyne Tess Onwueme's play *Tell it to Women: An Epic Drama for Women* (1997) from an Africana womanist perspective. In this paper, twelve characteristics only will be employed in analyzing Onwueme's play *Tell it to Women* because they are found to be the most salient characteristics exhibited by the play's female characters. The selected characteristics are: self-naming, self-definition, family centeredness, wholeness, role flexibility, adaptability, authenticity, genuine sisterhood, male compatibility, respect for elders, mothering and spirituality. Finally, the paper reveals the intra-gender conflict between urban and rural women in Onwueme's play as a result of racial and class prejudice; the two main plights of African women that are even prior to the plight of gender.

Theoretical Framework

Coined by Clenora Hudson-Weems (1945), the African American theorist, activist, critic and writer, in the late 1980s, Africana womanism is an ideology that refers to all African women within the continent or those of the diaspora, and focuses on displaying their suffering, demands, and unique experiences. Having believed that the previous ideologies did not adequately reflect the needs of African black women, Hudson-Weems was motivated to come up with a new theory. Therefore, Africana womanism came as a reaction to previous ideologies such as western feminism, black feminism and Alice Walker's womanism. In defining her new coinage, Hudson-Weems states:

Neither an outgrowth nor an addendum to feminism, Africana womanism is not black feminism, African feminism, or Walker's womanism that some Africana women have come to embrace. Africana womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women. (Hudson-Weems, 2001, p. 138)

As stated in the above quote, Africana womanism agenda is completely different from those of feminism, black feminism and Alice Walker's womanism whose priority is gender inequality though they address different groups of women.

Feminism is associated with white women and the plight of gender and female empowerment. It has sought to disturb the patriarchal social order, to achieve sexual parity, and to challenge male hegemony. In the 1970s, black feminism emerged in response to feminist movement's unreasonable assumption that all women, black and white, have the same experience and undergo similar oppression. Therefore, a group of black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, and bell hooks developed a distinct ideology for black women that expresses their

struggle against sexual and racial oppression. Black feminism “disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-whites-only ideology and political movement. Inserting the adjective ‘black’ challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and disrupts the false universal of this term for both white and black women” (Collins, 1996, p.13). Black feminism emphasizes the triple plight of black women based on sex, race, and class.

Womanism is an ideology coined by Alice Walker (1944), the black American writer and critic, in the early 1980s and evolved out of the black feminist movement. Alice Walker prefers the term “womanism” to black feminism because the term refers to “the Southern black folk expression of mothers to female children ‘you acting womanish’” which means that they act in “outrageous, courageous, and willful” ways. These are attributes that “freed them from the conventions long limiting white women” (Collins, 1996, p.10). Walker’s womanism was designated to satisfy the demands of colored women with regard to sexual as well as racial inequality. In her volume of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), Alice Walker defines a womanist as a “black feminist or feminist of color” (Walker, 1983, xi). She also states “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (xii). In her last definition, Walker, by comparing the two colors, alludes to the similarity between the two ideologies, and compares womanism to purple, the strong color, whereas feminism remains pale like lavender. Alice Walker’s womanism “seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men” (Collins, 1996, p. 11). As a matter of fact, Alice Walker’s womanism, though a womanist is defined by her as a black feminist, presents a different agenda from that of feminism addressing racism with sexism as the main plights challenging black women.

It is worthy to note that Alice Walker’s womanism has been evolved into Africana womanism by Clenora Hudson-Weems who

positioned the racial issue on top of her concept's priorities. Gerri Bates resolves that the difference between Hudson-Weems's theory and previous ideologies is that Africana womanism "rejects as foremost in women's struggle gender as an issue and the male as an enemy. . . and it has no identification with any traditional feminist organizations" (Bates, 2005, p. 37). In *The Womanist Reader* (2006), Clenora Hudson-Weems states that Africana womanism is the best terminology for her ideology for two basic reasons. The first part of the coinage, Africana, refers to the ethnicity of the woman being considered and relates to her ancestry and land base, Africa. As for the second part, womanism, it is far more appropriate than feminism. According to Hudson-Weems, "woman" is more suitable and more specific when naming a group of the human race whereas "female" can refer to a member of the animal or plant kingdom as well as to a member of the human race (Hudson-Weems, 1993, pp. 47-48).

In Africana womanism, Hudson-Weems reconsiders the hierarchy of interests for African women. Theirs is a "tripartite" plight of racism, classism and sexism (Hudson-Weems, 1989, p. 192). For her, the main dilemma of African women is racially grounded. Africana womanism agenda is distinguished from those of previous theories in that it serves the issues of race, class and gender respectively. Narrowing the African women challenges to the gender issue, according to Hudson-Weems, "de-emphasizes their major interest" and is considered "an abomination and an outright insult to their level of struggle" (Hudson-Weems, 1998, p. 39). For Africana womanists, sexism is an important issue, but it is not prior to racism and classism.

According to Africana womanism, women are burdened with the plight of racism and classism rather than that of sexism. Therefore, challenging race and class inequalities is a prerequisite for women empowerment. In Africana womanism, man is not an enemy, he is rather "the flip side of the coin" who works with his female counterpart, the

“original side of the coin” to challenge their shared oppression in order to achieve stability of the family and maintain indigenous cultural autonomy (Hudson-Weems, 2001, p. 138). Hudson-Weems states “We are and have always been co-partners with our male counterparts in the liberation struggle for our entire people—men—women, and children. And that reality remains a top priority for all true African people” (Hudson-Weems, 1997, p. 83). African womanism presents an Africa-centered paradigm that deals with the dynamics of the African family emphasizing flexible and compatible male/female relationship. Clenora Hudson-Weems “develops a theory that is based on a static, transhistorical view of African culture and identity” which means that her theory “assumes a composite African culture that remains largely untouched by the forces of history, context, and contact with other cultures” (Alexander-Floyd and Simien, 2006, p. 79).

According to African womanists, women’s autonomy is pursued through commitment to family and responsibility towards the African community that can only be achieved through male/female compatibility. Theirs is not a revolt against men, but against a racist system based on ethnic and class differences that exploits their natural resources. Therefore, African womanism is centered on the stability of the family as well as the welfare of the whole African community.

Clenora Hudson-Weems employs eighteen characteristics in defining the agenda of African womanism. These characteristics are as follows: self-naming, self-definition, family-centeredness, wholeness, authenticity, role flexibility, adaptability, struggling with male against oppression, genuine sisterhood, male compatibility, strength, respect, recognition, respect for elders, ambition, mothering, nurturing, and spirituality (Hudson-Weems, 2001, pp.137-38).

Self-naming and self-definition are two important key components that come on top of the theory’s characteristics. For African people, self-naming is a prerequisite for self-definition and both are

highly necessary in order to achieve self-identity. Hudson-Weems asserts that “the proper naming of a thing gives it essence” (Hudson-Weems, 2004, p.18). As a result of racial prejudice, African people have long been deprived of the right of self-naming and self-definition by their persecutors/colonizers.

The second cluster of Africana womanism components are those related to family. In *The Womanist Reader*, Hudson-Weems states “Africana women are seeking to reclaim security, stability, and nurturing of a family-based community” (Hudson-Weems, 1998, p. 38). For African men and women, family represents a vital part of their African heritage. The family-focused characteristics are family-centeredness, wholeness, authenticity, role flexibility and adaptability. They can all be achieved through commitment to family. In order to achieve wholeness and authenticity, the African men and women are attached to their African roots. By doing so, they maintain their racial and cultural integration. Unlike the dominant culture, gender role is not problematic for African women. Both men and women assume role flexibility and are adapted to work inside and outside home for the prosperity of the family and welfare of the African community.

The third cluster includes struggling with male against oppression, genuine sisterhood, and male compatibility. As aforementioned, for African woman, man is not an enemy. He is rather a partner in the long-life struggle against slavery and racial oppression. Both African men and women are compatible in challenging race and class inequalities. Genuine sisterhood “is one of the key components for human survival, for the security and harmony of women undergird the strength and structure of society and all its participants” (Hudson-Weems, 2001, p. 137). Through genuine, truthful sisterhood, African women can sustain and sympathize with one another against racial discrimination.

The last group of Africana womanism characteristics includes strength, respect, recognition, respect for elders, ambition, mothering, nurturing, and spirituality. These characteristics are considered Africana womanists' "attributes" that "are all necessary to have a vital and authentic Black female identity." Moreover, these attributes "represent a litmus test for identifying those women who are or who are not sufficiently Black and Afrocentric. Those who remain loyal to the race affirm, adopt, and/or exhibit the attributes of the Africana womanist" (Alexander-Floyd and Simien, 2006, p. 78). African men and women are attributed with these characteristics in their struggle against racial oppression. As a matter of fact, all these characteristics are required for the stability and security of a family-centered community.

Osonye Tess Onwueme (1955)

Many female dramatists have emerged in the Nigerian theater to present women's experiences and have contributed eminently to the development of the genre. Osonye Tess Onwueme (1955) is one of Nigeria's most prolific and well published contemporary female playwrights. One of Nigeria's prominent female writers, Onwueme's writings are rooted in Africa and underlined by African tradition and heritage. A leading female figure in the African theater, Onwueme's writings are women centered. Azunwo and Omovwimo resolve: "At a time when the absence of any female voice for women within the Nigerian playwright circle was obvious, Onwueme's plays served to illuminate the courage of women" (Azunwo and Omovwimo, 2015, p. 8). Depicting Onwueme's abilities as a playwright, Idoye Patrick E illustrates: "Through her discourses on gender, race, class and cultural differences, Onwueme has been able to expose the beauty and complexity of African culture to an international audience" (Idoye, 1995, p. 58). In her drama, Onwueme explores the abilities of African women and portrays a paradigm of their unique experiences that reflect their eminent attachment to their cultural heritage.

Tell it to Women (1997) witnesses Onwueme's artistic maturity and ideological shift from feminism to Africana womanism. Some of her earlier plays such as *A Hen Too Soon* (1983), *The Broken Cal-abash* (1984) and *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988) are displayed from a feminist standpoint. For Onwueme, Africana womanism is indubitably more applicable to her female African characters than western feminism. In *Tell it to Women*, Onwueme "has moved from what many would consider overt gender and generational conflicts to issues that bind all oppressed people together" (Affiah, 2012, p. 287). In her play, Onwueme criticizes western feminism exposing the infeasibility of this ideology in the African milieu. She considers the African concept of empowerment from a new perspective that differs from the feminist standpoint. Onwueme displays two distinct ideologies; western feminism, represented by urban women, and Africana womanism, represented by rural Idu women.

***Tell it to Women* (1997)**

Subtitled "*An Epic Drama for Women*," Onwueme's play *Tell it to Women* displays the cultural and ideological clashes between the rural women of the Idu village in the Nigerian Igbo community and their urban counterparts. The play introduces a group of Nigerian urban women, represented by Daisy and Ruth, preparing for the launching of the Better Life for Rural Women Program. Daisy, who is a western-educated woman and has a doctoral degree, is the director of women affairs in government, and her friend Ruth is an unmarried feminist scholar who is expected to be promoted if the program achieves success. Both Daisy and Ruth advocate western feminism and their mission is to "break boundaries of confinements and compartmentalization of [their] potentialities in the oppressive, despotic and tyrannical hegemony of patriarchy imposed on women these many years" (30). According to them, marriage is "the greatest sentence any woman could ever impose on herself" and is considered "an unforgivable insult" to women (71). Therefore, Daisy neglects her husband and denies all marital duties. For

her, a wife is a “servant,” a “cook,” a “cleaner,” a “steward,” a “waiter,” and a “janitor to clean up [the husband’s] mess” and “all for no pay” (78). In order to challenge male dominance, Daisy indulges in a lesbian relationship with Ruth that is practiced in Daisy’s family house where her husband and daughter live.

Yemoja, a semi-educated rural woman, is chosen as a representative of rural women of Idu in the government program. She is given a plaque in the Idu village, and is invited to sojourn in the capital city with the elite, well-educated Daisy and Ruth in order to prepare for the Better Life for Rural Women Program that is supposed to be launched in the city by the wife of the president. Adaku, the female king of Idu and the leader of the Umuada, daughters of the clan, expresses her exultation with the program: “A last we shall reap the fruits. . . . Something new and bright is here to bring light into our lives!” (28) The program is supposed to improve the lives of rural women who are abandoned and marginalized for a long time. According to this program, rural women shall have access to electricity, air conditioner, refrigerator, gas cooker and “all the ‘modern’ appliances that lighten the burden of womanhood” (47). In the city, Yemoja wants to learn the ways of urban women and to teach them to her fellow Idu women in order to enjoy the amenities of modern life. The very title of the play suggests a call for enlightenment and solidarity among women. What Yemoja will learn in the city, she will tell it to women in Idu village.

In Daisy’s house, class difference prevails, and Yemoja is treated as a slave. Since her arrival in the city, Yemoja has been assigned by Daisy to sleep on the floor in a little space by the corner of the living room and to get up by three o’clock in the morning to perform house chores. The elite women, Daisy and Ruth, “must ensure that the village woman understands her place in the scheme of things” (15). Daisy’s and Ruth’s western education empower them, and they think that rural women “are so backward that even if the hand of that clock was turned

back a century, they wouldn't know the difference. Why? Because they're so fixed in their ignorance" (17). Daisy constantly reminds Yemoja that "THIS IS THE CITY! CITY! Not the cave you call home in the village" (16). For her disappointment, Yemoja discovers that she escapes from male domination to that of urban women as she states, "If I am not trapped in a husband's chain or father's chain, I'm trapped in another woman's chain. . . Where is the freeeeedom. . .?" (21) Yemoja discovers that Daisy and Ruth enslave and exploit her for personal interest. Okei, Daisy's husband, criticizes his wife's feminist ideology as he addresses her: "Now you do not fight for equality but for extermination of every "other," including your fellow women!!! . . . You do not fight for equality, but for conquest and extermination of every other on your path to destruction" (85). Having been frustrated by the urban women's domination, Yemoja pathetically asks her fellow women: "Have we not gained new masters, deceptively speaking in feminine voices, and all in the name of liberation?" (207) At the end of the play, rural Idu women are empowered with commitment to their families and attachment to their African heritage to defy oppression and exploitation. From an African traditional perspective, Tess Onwueme uses in her epic drama ritual drumming, ritual dancing, and story-telling to portray her vigorous characters who are attributed with Africana womanist characteristics.

Self-Naming and self-definition

Having been acquainted with the importance of self-naming and self-definition for African people, Clenora Hudson-Weems coined a new terminology, Africana womanism, to name and to define the paradigm of their unique and rich experiences. As the most important characteristics in Hudson-Weems's new theory, self-naming and self-definition come on top of other components. In African culture, self-naming is very significant as it forms the basis for self-definition and self-identity.

As aforementioned, self-naming is a prerequisite for self-definition that creates autonomous identities for African people. In *Tell it to Women*, Adaku objects Daisy's denial of her real African name "Nneka" that means "mother is supreme," and fiercely blames her: "A name is not just a name. It is something. . . it means everything. YOUR NAME IS YOU!" (44). Daisy blindly absorbs the feminist ideology and westernizes her African name that reflects her cultural reality. In so doing, she denies her African identity. On the other hand, away from Idu, Yemoja is afraid of losing her name as she explains to Sherifat, Daisy's rural mother in law: "How can I not fear this new world? I know myself. I am Yemoja, the spirit of Yemoja. Idu knows me. But here in this city, I have no name. Nobody knows me . . . or rather, all they call me is 'she'" (98). For Yemoja, as an African womanist, losing her name means losing individual identity.

Emphasizing the importance of self-naming, Hudson-Weems states, "if you do not name and define yourself, somebody else surely will" (Hudson-Weems, 1997, p. 83). Through self-naming and self-definition, African people protect themselves from being labeled by their oppressors/colonizers. In Idu village, all members of the clan gather eight days after the birth of sons and daughters to give them names that "spoke of [their] hearts, of [their] time and of [their] world" (44). Idu people choose names for the newly born babies that are closely attached to their cultural heritage; for example, "Nwanyibuife" means "a daughter is a treasure forever," and "Egonwanne" means "you cannot buy a sister or brother, for the blood knot that binds them is priceless" (44). In addition to names, African people are distinguished with titles to indicate reverence and distinguished positions, a cultural aspect western community lacks. Adaku is given the title "Ada" that indicates her status as the oldest among the Umuada, daughters of the clan. Adaku is also distinguished with the title "Omu" that means the female king of Idu. In addition to the previous titles, she is given the title "Obi Diee" that means the one who knows the heart of her husband. These titles reveal the

authentic identity of the African woman and her attachment to her cultural heritage.

Commitment to family

The second cluster of Africana womanism characteristics are family-centeredness, wholeness, authenticity, role flexibility, and adaptability. They all reveal commitment to family that is of major importance for African women, men and children. Family is greatly valued as an integral part of the African heritage. Africana womanism is not female-centered; it is rather “family-centered” (Hudson-Weems, 2001, p. 138). In *Tell it to Women*, Daisy has a lesbian relationship with Ruth to defy commitment to familial and marital duties. According to Tess Onwueme, the stability of the family and welfare of its members are achieved through marriage as it is “difficult to conceive of an identity for the African woman outside the context of marriage, because it is within that category that her full personhood is realized and her contributions to the society become complete” (Uko, 2004, p. 223). For African women, marriage is a prerequisite for the stability of the family and the welfare of the whole community.

Wholeness, as clarified in *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, means “completeness” that can only be achieved through commitment to family. As for authenticity, it depends on the ability of African people to be “culturally connected” (Hudson-Weems, 1993, p. 69). For African people, authenticity attainability is closely attached to their cultural heritage. As an Africana womanist, Tolue, Yemoja’s mother, needs modern experience without deleting her cultural heritage to which she is closely connected as she explains to Ajaka, Yemoja’s mother-in-law “I think what we are really looking for is. . . is to add wisdom of the new people to our own, . . . That is THE BETTER LIFE! Not wiping out. But adding . . . adding new things to our life. . . not taking away the good things we already have for mere promises of value that is not yet tested” (179). As this quote shows, African people can only

attain their authentic identities through connectedness to their cultural heritage.

In their speech to rural women, Daisy and Ruth use English instead of indigenous tongue to explain the program's plan. Adaku, the mother of the clan, rejects their use of a "borrowed tongue" while talking to their own people (42). As an authentic Africana womanist who is closely attached to her African roots, Adaku poignantly asks Ruth: "Tell me why you people take pride in going to other people's land, borrow their tongue and then throw your own tongue away?" (45). Rural women need to improve their social conditions without losing their indigenous culture. Tolué advises her fellow women to take only what is appropriate from urban women's ideology that will improve their conditions: "take the meat and egg, and throw away the rest" (48). Sherifat explains to Yemoja that rural women must cling to their own way of life and abandon the urban women's imported ideology as she states: "What we need to live is not their life, but our own. This is why, for us, the better life means where we have a hold, not where we remain strangers and objects to be ordered around at the will of others" (102). Idu rural women decide to announce racial pride through reviving their cultural heritage by celebrating yam festival, using drums and ritual dancing. All rural women dance and present various products from Idu such as yams, cassava, beautiful hand-woven clothes and other products. In doing so, they display the richness of their land and emphasize their authenticity and pride in their indigenous culture and unique legacy.

Flexible gender role and adaptability lead to wholeness which signifies the priority of the family for African people. As the champion of rural women, Adaku argues with them the futility of applying urban women's feminist standpoint of female empowerment over men in their African environment because this leads to deficiency in the family order: "But this thing about taking power from men and giving it to women is where I have a problem. Men have their own power and so do the women

of Idu. If you now concentrate power in one part, male or female, think of the problem that will create in Idu. What becomes of the family?" (36). This quote signifies the Africana womanists' commitment to family and prioritizing its welfare and stability.

Adaku emphasizes flexible gender role in the African community and its significance for the stability of the family as she states, "While men exhibit their chivalry in the battlefield, women exhibit their own chivalry in the home" (37). Sherifat also emphasizes the importance of flexible gender role for a healthy family life:

We see the world in circles: the male is male and the female is female. No one can take the place of another; no one is greater than another. Their value is not measured in terms of greater or lesser value. Each one is priceless in the order of things. Each one is part of the other, male and female. . . . Maize cannot take the place of yam in the cooking pot. And yam cannot take the place of maize. . . . Each one has its own place in the barn. (126)

From antiquity to the present, African woman work side by side with African man to defy slavery and to support their families. In order to constitute a stable family and a balanced society, male/female relationship must be complementary.

As for adaptability, the African woman is adapted to difficult conditions from the time of slavery as she does not enjoy the luxurious life of the white woman. The Africana womanist does not "recognize a need for a 'separate space' as does the mainstream, White feminist" (Alexander-Floyd and Smien, 2006, p.71). In *Tell it to Women*, Adaku expresses her exultation with the Better Life Program that will improve their life. She describes the hard life African women used to live:

Now it's our time. After so many years of patching our clothes. . . washing and washing by the river banks. . . our fingernails so short from frequent breaking. . . our heads going bald. . . from perpetual loads of water on our graying heads. Our feet getting

smaller and smaller from eternal trudging to and from the stream to market, to farm, in search of life. (28)

As a matter of fact, African women are adapted to these difficult conditions to nurture and support their families. They work hard for the stability and welfare of the family as well as the African community as a whole.

Genuine sisterhood

In addition to self-naming, self-definition, and commitment to family, genuine sisterhood is of great importance for African womanists. Genuine sisterhood refers to authentic female bonding and solidarity among African women who have the same experiences and conditions. In *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Hudson-Weems defines this important characteristic as follows:

This sisterly bond is a reciprocal one, one in which each gives and receives equally. In this community of women, all reach out in support of each other, demonstrating a tremendous sense of responsibility for each other by looking out for one another. They are joined emotionally, as they embody empathetic understanding of each other's shared experiences. Everything is given out of love, criticism included, and in the end, the sharing of the common and individual experiences and ideas yields rewards. (Hudson-Weems, 1993, p. 65)

Since black women have a shared experience of oppression and slavery whether in Africa or in the Diaspora, they sympathize with one another against racial prejudice. bell hooks, the black American feminist and social activist (1952), asserts "We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity" (hooks, 1984, p. 65). African womanist's sisterhood must be genuine and authentic that contrasts false sisterhood presented in western feminism agenda. In *Tell it to Women*, Daisy and Ruth, as advocates of western

feminism, consider themselves “the torch bearers of global sisterhood” although they never show any kind of solidarity with rural women (30). Yemoja follows them because she thinks that “they believe in their words about sisterhood” (67). For black women, “sisterhood is deeply ingrained in their experience as means of transferring knowledge from one another and of sharing their experiences. . . sharing their ordeal” (Anantharaj and Thiruppathi, 2019, p. 53). Having a great sense of responsibility towards Idu women, Yemoja leaves her family in Idu and agrees to liaise between them and urban women to improve their lives. Although in Daisy’s house she faces all kinds of humiliation and degradation, she stays for the welfare and benefit of all rural women.

Emphasizing the importance of genuine sisterhood, from Onwueme’s point of view, African women “need to educate one another and be sincerely in solidarity, being [their] sister’s keeper” (Uko, 2004, p. 224). Unlike feminist urban women, rural women express their strength and unlimited abilities through practicing genuine sisterhood. Instead of doing marching, as commanded by urban women in the launching of their program, Yemoja, Sherifat, Tolue and Ajaka “[u]ntie the sealed lips of the drums” and drum for other rural women to enunciate their power (205). Their drumming in the last scene of the drama “echoes the real strength of sisterhood” and female enhancement among the Umuada, daughters of the clan (Chavan, 2015, p. 252). As stated in the stage directions, “*Yemoja and the rest of the women become more and more empowered by the assertive rhythms of the drums*” (190). Through their ritual drumming and dancing, rural women articulate their pride in their African heritage as well as the strength of sisterhood.

Male Compatibility

In Africana womanism, male compatibility means that male/female relationship must be harmonious. For the African woman, man is not an enemy; he is rather a companion and a partner in their struggle against racial oppression and class inequalities. According to

Hudson-Weems, “[man’s] plight is interconnected with that of the Africana woman, who, like her male counterpart, must combat the issue of racism first” (Hudson-Weems, 2005, p. 626). They also work side by side inside and outside home for the stability of the family and the welfare of the whole community. In *The Womanist Reader*, Hudson-Weems points at male compatibility in the African milieu: “Africana men and Africana women are and should be allies, struggling as they have since the days of slavery for equal social, economic, and political rights as fellow human beings in the world” (Hudson-Weems, 2006, 43). For African women, race and class biases are prioritized over gender issues. In *Tell it to Women*, Sherifat remarkably explicates male compatibility with woman referring to man as the sun and to woman as the moon as she addresses Ruth:

I could tell you why the sun woos the moon; why the moon needs the sun. . . and why both need each other. . . complement each other and are never measured in terms of equality. Each one, its beauty. Each one, its glow of fire. . . tinged with shades of fear! The moon sails the sky! So does the sun! But they seek each other, flirt and fight with each other until one bows to the other, and the other bows to it, my learned one. We do not see these bows in terms of conquests, but triumphs in the consummation of life and nature. (130)

In a philosophical, exquisite tone, Sherifat lectures Ruth and teaches her the noble traditions and principles of her African environment. As the above quote shows, male/female relationship is not conflicting; it is rather complementary as they persistently work together to challenge any kind of prejudice or exploitation.

Respect for elders

It is worthy to note that according to the dynamics of traditional African community elder people are endowed with power and reverence. Respect for elders is an important descriptor of Africana womanism. In

her seminal book *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Hudson-Weems states: "The true Africana womanist respects and appreciates elders, insisting that her young do likewise, for African elders have served as role models and have paved the way for future generations" (Hudson-, 1993, p. 70). In the Sheraton hotel where the launching of the program takes place, as stated in the stage directions: "*Yemoja and Sherifat go down on their knees as a mark of respect for Adaku, their elder*" (183). Yemoja also shows respect for Sherifat when the latter orders her to stay in the launching of the program: "Where I come from, age speaks. Age commands respect. If our mother commands me to stay, who then can be against me?" (98). Okei, Daisy's husband, teaches his young daughter, Bose, the values and traditions of their Igbo community emphasizing respect for elder people: "She's [Yemoja] definitely much older than you. . . . So respect her. She's older than you are. Respect is very important in our tradition" (113). As an Idu man, Okei values the noble traditions of his African milieu.

Wisdom and guidance of elder people are highly prized in the African community. As the eldest of the Umuada, Adaku is the guardian of the cultural values and the keynote speaker of the clan. Though Adaku is not educated, she discusses serious matters with Idu women and criticizes modern women's western ideas: "Modern girls burn their men, burn them alive! And they think that is what gives them power!" (166). Being the eldest of the clan, Adaku is distinguished with the title "Ada" which is "a very important position of power, authority and respect among men and women," a title that indicates her distinct position among her fellow women (26). According to Tess Onwueme, the elders in her village are "the vital reservoirs of language" and her "first teachers" whose "rich words were always cooked, stewed, simmering or brewing in the mind till they began to percolate into [her] psyche, and through it, [her] creative consciousness" (Uko, 2004, p. 221). In the African

community, elders receive homage from all members of the clan as they are bearers of tradition and culture and protectors of their communities.

Mothering

Mothering is the main function of women, especially mothers. For African people, motherhood is a source of female empowerment. The Africana womanist “insisted on identifying herself as mother and companion” (Hudson-Weems, 2008, p.58). Moreover, in *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Hudson-Weems generalizes the role of the African mother to care for mankind not only for her own family or community as she asserts that “the Africana woman is committed to the art of mothering and nurturing, her own children in particular and humankind in general” (Hudson-Weems, 1993, p. 72). Adaku, entitled Omu and Ada as the oldest among the Umuda, daughters of the clan, believes that “motherhood is the ultimate power” since woman has the ability to “create and carry another life;” an important process in which men are “outsiders” (36). In the African community, motherhood is highly respected as it is the only means to keep family lineage. According to Onwueme, motherhood is considered “the sacred process of perpetuation of the lineage” (Uko, 2004, p. 224). For rural women, motherhood is “[t]he ultimate power of creation, that cannot be bought or bribed or sold or stolen by any man. It is no power any woman should give up out of foolishness, selfishness or shame!” (161) Adaku, as the oldest among the Umuada, provides love and sustenance not only to her children but to all members of the clan.

In her speech, Daisy advises rural women to follow the westernized notion of feminism in order to end their supposed marginalization: “Motherhood cannot be a prerequisite for life!! Women, leave your husbands and go to school! Women, know your lives too can be fulfilled outside motherhood. There is no law making motherhood compulsory” (48). Unaware of the Igbo cosmology, urban women who are advocates of western feminism defy marriage and motherhood and consider them

obstacles against achieving woman's autonomy. In doing so, according to Adaku, they will "turn the world upside down" (38). Daisy and Ruth, according to Hudson-Weems, "are mere assimilationists or sellouts" who "have no true commitment to their culture or their people" (Hudson-Weems, 1993, pp. 49-50). Unlike feminist city women, rural women do not need to seize men's power because they are extremely empowered with womanhood and motherhood. Adaku criticizes modern women's feminist standpoint as she states: "Modern women do not know how much power they are losing by trying so hard to deny their natural rights of womanhood and the powers of motherhood" (163). In her play, Tess Onwueme highlights the futility of applying the western agenda of feminism in the African milieu.

In the African community, motherhood is women's access to power and authority. Mothers are endowed with tremendous respect and unlimited power. Women, especially mothers, are the providers of support and nurture for their families and communities. African mothers "have to be the first teachers of their children, family and communities" (Uko, 2004, p. 269). Highlighting the important role of mothers, Adaku states: "We are the womb of the earth. From our wombs, sons sprout to earth. From our hands, sons return to earth. It is the life power, the mystery of womanhood" (54). Tolue states: "And if they say that mothering is too burdensome and is an undesirable sign of illiteracy or underdevelopment, let them leave me with my own burden and not impose their vision of the world on me, as if I cannot see and choose for myself" (177). Emphasizing the power of motherhood, Adaku exclaims "Which man is born except from our womb?" (202) African mothers realize their distinguished position as well as their responsibilities as nurturers and protectors for their communities.

Spirituality

Rural Idu Africana womanists are highly spiritual as they are strongly committed to their traditions and beliefs. Idu people believe in a

higher power that endows them with an everlasting spiritual life. Sherifat explains to her ten-year granddaughter Bose that “Idu people never die. We pass away, but we live forever. . . . We may die in body; we do not die in spirit! When we get old, we return to earth to be born again. We remain there beneath the earth until we’re born again as babies. That is why we pour libation on the earth” (152). In the new yam festival, Sherifat chooses Bose to represent the spirit of the new yam, and Adaku puts the effigy of the new yam spirit on Bose’s head. In doing so, Bose “represents the future which must be kept alive in the spiritual essence of the Idu people” (Uko, 2004, p. 42). In the launching of the Better Life Program, Idu women insist on performing ritual drumming and dancing instead of marching to celebrate the spiritual new yam festival and to revive their heritage.

Conclusion

In her endeavors to empower African women, Clenora Hudson-Weems coined her new theory, *Africana womanism*, in order to fill the gaps left by black feminists and womanists. Unlike previous ideologies, Hudson-Weems’s theory prioritizes the racial plight over those of class and gender. According to Hudson-Weems, African women have a “tripartite plight,” that of race, class and gender respectively. For her new ideology, Hudson-Weems forms eighteen characteristics, twelve of which have been analyzed through Osonye Tess Onwueme’s play *Tell it to Women*.

Osonye Tess Onwueme’s *Tell it to Women* witnesses her shift from feminism to *Africana womanism*. In her play, Onwueme displays two polarities; western feminism, represented by urban women of the Nigerian Igbo community, and *Africana womanism*, represented by rural Idu women. According to western feminism agenda, the plight of gender is a number one priority. For the urban Ruth and Daisy who advocate western feminism, marriage is “an unforgivable insult” to women and motherhood is not “compulsory” for them. Therefore, from a feminist

standpoint, they challenge male hegemony and seek female empowerment outside barriers of marriage. On the other hand, Yemoja, Adaku, Sherifat, Tolue, Ajaka and other rural women in Idu village advocate Africana womanism and are empowered by womanhood and motherhood as well as their attachment to their cultural heritage.

In *Tell it to Women*, Onwueme presents an intra-gender class conflict between rural women and their urban counterparts who also belong to Idu village. For Daisy and Ruth, rural women “are nothing but stubborn pigs full of shit” (17). With this intra-gender conflict, Tess Onwueme emphasizes the problem of classism which is, according to Hudson-Weems, the second important issue in the “tripartite” plight of African women. In her play, Tess Onwueme, as an Africana womanist, prioritizes race and class issues over the gender one. Through Daisy’s and Ruth’s power, Onwueme criticizes western feminism showing that “women in power can be as devious as the men they have replaced” because they “seek to create class consciousness and promote new hierarchies in the house of women” (Idoye, 1995, p. 25). At the end of the play, rural women, in spite of initial impediments, succeed in achieving their aims through an Africana womanist ideology that is applicable in their African milieu.

Onwueme’s *Tell it to Women*, “offers a reassessment of the feminist movement by pointing out the contradictions, frustrations and disenchantment that have gripped the movement” (Idoye, 1995, p. 55). The play reveals the futility of applying feminism and its agenda in the African society whose welfare is not basically associated with female empowerment and sexual equality, but based on commitment to family and complementarity among its members. Having realized the implausibility of applying urban women’s feminist ideology in the African Igbo community, Yemoja announces to all rural women that “oil and water cannot blend” (187). In *Tell it to Women*, according to Onwueme, western feminism “misfits within the African context” (Uko,

2004, p. 47). In the African family, male/female relationship is not competitive, it is rather complementary. African men and women work side by side inside and outside home and persistently struggle against race and class oppression.

In her play, Onwueme exposes the disastrous effect of western culture and colonial education on African people. Through western education, African people undergo racial prejudice as they feel inferior to the white race. Moreover, African cultural heritage and traditions are replaced by western norms and customs. Empowered by western education, Daisy and Ruth deny their African culture and consider themselves superior to their fellow women. In her epic drama, Onwueme presents a group of Africana womanist characters in Idu village who challenge western culture as well as race and class inequalities by clinging to their African roots.

Onwueme's female characters are vigorous Africana womanists who are self-namer, self-definer, family-centered, whole, flexible in gender role, adaptable, authentic, genuine in sisterhood, compatible with their male counterparts, respectful for elders, mothering and spiritual. Idu women "refuse to be satisfied with their society-carved out role. They all fight their way through obstacles and proved their mettle" (Azunwo and Omovwimo, 2015, p. 8). In her play, *Osonye Tess* Onwueme portrays her female characters as conscious figures that perceive their socio-political and cultural rights and fight bravely against any kind of prejudice or exploitation.

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