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Gombe Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (GOSAJOLLCOS) is a peer-reviewed journal of the Department of English, Gombe State University. The journal is committed to the development of communication arts through researches in Language, Linguistics, Literature, Theatre Arts, Cultural Studies, Creative Arts, Media and Communication Studies. It has both print and online versions. The Editorial board hereby calls for thoroughly researched papers and articles on the subject areas already mentioned. Submissions of papers are accepted all year round but publication is expected to be done in May/June annually. All manuscripts should be accompanied with the sum of ten thousand (10,000) naira only. On acceptance of any manuscript, contributors will pay the sum of twenty five thousand (25,000) naira only as publication fee.

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**RE-INSCRIBING AFRICAN WOMEN IN PATRIARCHAL CULTURE: A STUDY OF ONWUEME'S *THE REIGN OF WAZOBIA***

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the re-inscription of women in patriarchy as portrayed in Onwueme's The Reign of Wazobia. It proceeds on the assumption that the patriarchal culture discriminates against women and that the selected play illustrates and addresses instances of such discrimination. Using African Womanism, the paper explores the representation of the womanist interests in the The Reign of Wazobia and the end to which such interests are advocated. The paper finds that The Reign of Wazobia is deliberate in its projection of the female characters and its emasculation of the male characters. The end to which, this is done to celebrate women as agents of change and peace seekers. More so, this is done to re-inscribe their place in the society; as not just committed followers but also productive, peace loving and just leaders. The paper concludes that the selected text reverses socio-political trajectory of leadership in patriarchal societies as a means of advocating for social and political justice for all, especially for women.*

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**Introduction**

The place of the woman in a patriarchal system has always been "second fiddled", with culture and tradition serving as the strongest agents of their continuous and subtle oppression. Men have always been at the forefront of deciding the fate of what overtime translates to culture. Culture is a great enabler that is also disabling (McDermott and Varenne, 336). Thus, culture as it were often favors men and victimizes women. It is dominated by what Ladele calls "masculinist ideologies" (23) In response to this, the representation of women in literature especially by female writers often capture such bias and tendencies located in culture. In fact, the emergence of female writers in Nigerian literature, for instance, was premised on the need to achieve some sort of poetic justice which ultimately is expected to translate to cultural and social justice particularly for women. Thus, the likes of flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta ushered in a dispensation of women writers who engaged the readership with striking heroines that rose above and against masculinist norms. The representation of male characters, in contrast, also introduces the whole notion of male castration; a

situation where male characters are emasculated and portrayed as an expression of irresponsibility, oppression and everything negative all as a reactionary measure towards re-writing the female character and giving her a voice of relevance and a pride of place within a male dominated society. Such representations have come to be categorized as women writing which has been examined from different perspectives with strands of theories that have emerged from feminist discourses. The idea behind these projections is to rethink the masculinist ethos and place the plight and right of women in perspective. Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988) is an example of such projections. This paper examines the re-invention of patriarchy; the displacement of men from leadership by women. The argument presented is that Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* is a call to women liberation and freedom from the tyranny of men. Using African Womanism as theoretical framework, this paper examines the nature and scope of the women liberation advocated in the text.

### **African Womanism as Theoretical Framework**

African Womanism is an Afrocentric alternative to feminism. Feminism has often been seen as a western concept, but African women are increasingly redefining it to suit their own purposes. Acholonu (1995:93) also defines African feminism as “a mode of literary criticism that approaches a text with a primary concern for the female experience in it, the fictional experience of the characters and the deductible or imaginable experience of the African female writer’s character in the text as a yardstick for measuring the experience of the African woman in society.” African feminism can be subsumed under the term “womanism” which has gained recognition among some African female writers. Acholonu (1995:88) also explains that “recently, black and African feminists are adopting the term womanism as a replacement for feminism”. Womanism is a term coined by Alice Walker an African American writer and also a feminist activist. Walker (1983:87) defines womanism or a womanist as “a woman who loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women emotional flexibility, and women’s strength and sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually”. Ogunyemi (1985) also observes that “womanism is black centered; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; but unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand.” Womanism does not only include African American and African women but also women of color as well. Orjinta (2013:65) explains that Motherism and Stiwanism achieved the same objectives as womanism, as they are branches of womanist theory which emphasize certain aspects of womanism and try to develop them.

### **Tenets of Womanism**

There are various tenets of womanism but the basic ones which this study adopts include:

- Womanist emphasis on fairness and equity in the relationship between men and women in order to have the society where men and women survive in equal dignity, mutual respect and self-actualization. It is totally against all forms of cultural, social and economic oppression of African women.
- Womanist interest not only on sexism and racism but also on culture, nationality, economic and political consideration in challenging oppressive patriarchal system.
- The Womanist interest in independence, togetherness and survival.

This paper proposes that these tenets offer critical insight to the examination of women liberation and freedom from the tyranny of men as depicted in Onwueme’s *The Reign of Wazobia*.

### **Synopsis of the Primary Text**

The play *The Reign of Wazobia* re-examines the masculine ethos that shapes the political trajectory of patriarchal societies. The play attempts a reversal of roles by narrating a world that questions the chauvinistic tendencies of men and displaces them eventually. The play essentially highlights issues that require social, political and cultural justice in the gender-equity war that has long characterised the coexistence of men and women across cultures and systems that are patriarchal. Wazobia becomes a symbol and agent of change. Her reign ushers in a new dispensation for women especially against the oppressive cultures and systems that question their visibility in terms of leadership and even followership. The choice of a female King-surrogate triggers the conflict that facilitates the development of the plot and the need for a resolution. The rise in action is based on the reaction of the male

folk to their displacement and the new leave that the women were beginning assume. Both parties plan to iron out their grievances separately and the men were overwhelmed by the capacity of women to arise, unite and further their course in the midst of the schemes and resistance from men who were supposedly grounded in the art of politics. In the end, the women triumphed.

### **Re-thinking the Masculine Ethos and Socio-Political Trajectory in Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia***

Instances of the need to emphasise fairness and equity in the relationship between men and women are replete in Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*. The play creates a world that strives to ensure fairness and equity at several levels. This is set in motion with the emergence of Wazobia as King-Surrogate. She then works hard to create a society where men and women survive in equal dignity, mutual respect and self-actualization. She begins by changing the symbol of the ancestral staff from that of "manhood" to a palm tree (p. 38) and resists firmly the attempt of the elders to undermine her authority. The palm tree as she declares

From top to bottom has all and produces all: from leaves, to thatch, to shade, to brown. From fruit, to wine, to oil, to kernel...Each part, its own value and yet interdependent on all other parts. We all, man, woman, child must be schooled. To actualize these potentials for full benefit, for all with none posing an obstacle to another, with the left hand washing the right, and the right hand the left. Henceforth women will have equal representation in rulership (Pp. 38-39)

The palm tree as illustrated in the above quote becomes a symbol of their common humanity and the expression of the value of everyone in the community; men, women and children. As against the initial symbol that places the man as next to the gods. Wazobia call herself "the lead Masquerade who speaks

many tongues" (p.8) in other words she is willing to speak the languages of all gender and races. With her "feminine fingers" she is set to "embroider" (p. 9) society into fairness and equity for all, to rid it of the biases against women and children.

The decision to dress like a man is also to present her as an embodiment of both genders a woman dressed in a man's attire is an expression of both figures. Her allegiance is to both genders but more importantly; to creating justice in the society. Thus, every group that has suffered oppression and relegation should go to her to find freedom. This is why she rebukes Wa, Zo and Bia from kneeling before her when she declares:

Rise, rise, rise-my faithful ones.  
Lest you sprain your knees.  
It is no time to kneel but a time to stand.  
It is no time to succumb but to stand, my women. (P. 24)

The implication of this is that women like men have earned an equal seat before the king. This is all in the bid to usher in a new dispensation, that treats women no less than men. Wazobia expresses her willingness to ensure justice when she describes her neutrality thus:

I know when men are united they have a common enemy. That is woman. The king will not allow himself to be dragged into the mud of your prejudices. He, the king, she is beyond man or woman. The king has therefore gathered you, to make this pronouncement. That what-ever you call yourself, you are, every one of you, first and foremost, human beings with potentials waiting to be actualised for the benefit of this kingdom (p.34)

This largely implies that Wazobia is willing to create a level playing ground that will allow everyone to maximise their potentials on the common grounds of humanity and not gender. To achieve this she disconnects



herself from being male or female and assumes a neutral gender.

The pursuit of equity is also seen in the decision of Wazobia to stop Iyase from sending youths and children away from a gathering before certain "serious state matters" are discussed. For her everyone must be a part of the tilling and toiling for growth to take place (p.32). S/he makes her case thus:

I do not see any reason why women and Youths must be kept away from matters of state concern. Matters of state affect them much as they affect chiefs and princes (p. 32)

This is an attempt to create an all-inclusive system that does not discriminate against women and youths. Ozoma also makes a case for youths who as he argues travel far and wide and can offer the benefit of their sojourn beyond their land (p. 22-23). There is also the case of the man who chases his wife right to the midst of a meeting where she runs into to seek refuge. He threatens to beat her because he believes she is his property and can do whatever he deems fit with her. Wazobia's verdict was for him to tender an apology to his wife before everyone (p. 39) and rather than do so, he divorces her right before everyone. The play thus, captures the attempt by Wazobia to create an environment that is all-accommodating, giving opportunity to everyone. This is not without protest from the men that are why she poses the question "should I or should I not" more like an expression of the dilemma that confronts her resolve to ensure justice and the strong resistance she faces from the men. Thus Wazobia with the support of the women who are more of the beneficiaries of the clamor for socio-cultural justice is able to ensure fairness and equity.

Beyond the quest for equity, Womanist interest also centres on culture, nationality, economic and political consideration in challenging oppressive patriarchal system. The entire move by Wazobia is an attempt to rise above and against cultural systems that

encourage the bias against women. In the play Wazobia herself is a product of an abusive home; Kaanebi, the Queen mother is described by Anehe as "a woman so wretched that her husband pounded her like yam fufu and finally sent her away..." (p. 19). This explains why she perhaps found the motivation to ensure that women are liberated from such maltreatments. The patriarchal system is often characterized by male hegemony that relegate women are relegated to the background. It is in the spirit of such practice that Wazobia is described as a "mere girl" even by Wa (p.19) a fellow woman who ought to be by the side of her fellow woman. To Anehe and Iyase, the gods must have been blind to choose a woman as the king-surrogate (p. 20 and 46, respectively). In a culture where according to Iyase women are men's earth to set foot on (p. 46) the woman is considered a second class citizen. Even more so, women without husbands who are compared to a meal that is unappealing (p. 22). The discrimination is also evident in performances. For instance, the beat of music changed, when the chiefs arrived the arena of the ceremony, to a "more vibrant or masculinist tune" (p. 16) displacing the maidens who were previously dancing. They were however forced to give way for the men, the custodians of traditions and cultures within the patriarchal setup. This is why the women developed "iron hands" to liberate themselves from the tyranny of the men. The projection of these issues in the play is reflective of the womanist struggles and interests. Thus, there is a deliberate attempt to question patriarchy and male dominance within societies that are implicated in the representation.

Despite the agitation, the intention of Wazobia is to create a level playing ground for the peaceful co-existence of men and women. Her mission is to do away with ceremonies and practices that are meant to extort women (p. 27). This explains why s/he urges the women to refrain from violence. S/he comments thus; "Women, peace! Peace!

Spill no blood. Ours is to plant seed yams" (p. 70), the charge also given by Omo is for women to eat their portion (p. 70). Their protest is not for total domination but for equal space for free cultural and social transaction between men and women. This is why the verdict given to the man that beats his wife is simply for him to apologize. More radical interventions would require stiffer measures. Essentially, the playwright creates a space that questions cultural biases against women. She positions Wazobia as an agent of change. Wazobia can therefore be said to symbolise the womanist agitations.

### Conclusion

This paper has examines the masculine ethos and socio-political trajectory in Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* as a re-thinking of the issue of patriarchal dominance within the socio-cultural and socio-political landscape of Africa. It engages the African Womanist theoretical framework as a means of domesticating a global call for women liberation and freedom within the purview of African Feminism. The argument presented in this paper is the play is an expression of the agitation of and for the African women who are under the grip of patriarchal cultural oppression. Using the character of Wazobia, the playwright narrates a world that advocates, pursues and actualized the celebration of women leaders as game changers and advocates of social and political justice. The victory of Wazobia is therefore the victory of all women who are confronted by the tyranny of male dominance and every attempt to subjugate the political will of women. The paper concludes that Onwueme's

*The Reign of Wazobia* reverses the socio-political trajectory of patriarchal societies and advocates social justice for all.

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