

## The Fallacy of the “Metropolis” in Postcolonial Feminist Discourses: Reading Osonye Tess Onwueme’s *Tell it to Women: An Epic Drama for Women*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on intra-gender representations and difference, using Osonye Tess Onwueme’s *Tell it to Women: An Epic Drama for Women*, the major concern being the controversies in universalising Western Oriented Feminist discourses in non-Western contexts. Among these are questions of patriarchy, oppression, mothering and universal sisterhood which tend to dominate metropolitan discourses, yet do not represent non-western Feminist ideologies and the other. Postcolonial Feminism is used to discuss these fallacies and the need for assertiveness of the other-Idu women in the stronghold of Eurocentric Feminism as espoused by Ruth and Daisy. Analyses show that it is fallacious not to consider, study and understand other contexts/people or supposed others before theorising about them and their needs. There is need to assert and preserve one’s identity in the face of Western impositions. Thus, the need for reorientation of the perception and consideration of modern intellectual women towards rural women is necessary. This is imperative because uncritically propagating western discourses in non-western spaces has remained unproductive and will for a long time be so.

**Key words:** Fallacy, Metropolis, Periphery, Universal Sisterhood

### INTRODUCTION

I start with a brief experience from where I got the inspiration to write this paper. After a rigorous campaign by city women of the ruling party in Cameroon during the 2011 presidential election in my village, one old and seemingly “good-for-nothing” woman, by the standards of judgement of the city women, embarrassed them<sup>1</sup>. These city dwelling women who had, for the most part, been “blessed” with colonial education right to the university level had brought salt, some tablets of soap and a few other things as is always the case; this tradition, as usual comes after every seven years as politicians and their loyalists go to canvass for votes and disappear to return only during the next election, bringing what they assume will move the poor and wretched villagers to vote for them. After a long, rigorous ostensibly convincing talk and the enumeration of the niceties they had brought to show how serious they were, one old woman raised her hand and told them: “What I need is my salt, women, not your salt. If I take your salt, I will consume it and it will be finished in a few days. I very much value my salt which is the bench that the mayor constructed by the roadside for people like us. If I harvest cocoyams, yams, plantain or beans, I place it on the bench and a car can easily stop by and purchase them. So, you can as well take your salt back to the city where you are coming from.” The women were shocked to their

marrows but the question remains whether they bothered to find out the needs of these women or they just assumed what they need since they were coming from the city and knew what was good for the assumed backward, uneducated village women.

Then I came to read Osonye Tess Onwueme’s *Tell it to Women* and it became more vivid in this dramatic piece what I had witnessed; that women in the women’s struggle have constructed centre and margin barriers that are difficult to bridge, thereby, foregrounding that principles and discourses on gender with specificities on migration, suppression, resistance, representation can hardly be universalised even within the postcolonial space as Onwueme represents through allegory. The focus of this essay is principally on gender with specificities on migration, suppression, resistance, representation and difference. With issues of gender, I will dwell on Feminism and particularly on Postcolonial Feminism since it focuses mainly on issues linking the metropolitan and peripheral women. In Postcolonial discourses, metropolitanism is the discourse and space of power, generally referred to the former coloniser, which is often considered mighty and influential and is linked closely to the self in relation to the other, the ex-colonised discourse, which denotes the marginal, less powerful, other and the victim of the Metropolis. Thus, what the Metropolis decrees should be obtainable there and beyond.

The transposition of Western ideologies and concepts to non-western spaces has had a lot of controversies. While some non-Western people have seen the acceptance of these ideologies as the super highway, others have continuously condemned their interference in non-Western contexts. Yet, a considerable number have taken the hybrid position, thus blending what is good in both and condemning what they think inappropriate. For the believers in the Western super highway, their orientation is guided by what Edward Said refers to as “the two indivisible foundations of European authority- Knowledge and Power” which permits the West to dictate the world orders (*The Postcolonial Studies Reader* 1). The way through the essentialism that puts west and non-west ideologies has come to be the hybrid discourse; the blending which is wisely referred to by Homi Bhabha as the “third space”. Postcolonial women’s spaces are also included in this general structure of centre and periphery geographies and of course, with the creation of new divides that are constructed from within the gendered space. It is against this theoretical backdrop that this paper discusses centre and periphery ideologies in Osonye Tess Onwueme’s *Tell it to Women*; assessing the relations between women built on “differential” constructs of educated versus uneducated, villager versus city dwelling women and the epistemic violence that constructs the villager and uneducated as the subaltern. Onwueme’s *Tell it to Women: An Epic Drama for Women* allegorises and puts to question the homogenising of women not based on biological essentials but on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological essentials. It will be important to examine the (in)appropriateness of promoting the “oneness” and in this case, promote and consider the metropolitan (in this study I am referring to city and educated women) discourses, practices and ideals as the super highway for all woman yet in practice, the “one” especially in the play is so artificially constructed to the vantage point of a particular group of women.

### **METROPOLITAN DYNAMICS IN FEMINISM: A THEORETICAL ORIENTATION**

Postcolonialism and Postcolonial theory, generally, emerged to counter beliefs and practices which always projected the Metropolis as the self, ordered rational and the Periphery as the other, chaotic and irrational and it involves a wide range of issues in this context. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin say:

Postcolonial theory involves discussion about experiences of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being. (2)

Postcolonial Feminism therefore emerges out of Postcolonialism. However, Postcolonialism and Feminism though addressing different issues generally follow a convergent path and therefore possess striking similarities. While postcolonial criticism is a reaction to colonialism

and the treatment of non-Western white cultures as other, Feminism is a reaction to male chauvinistic tendencies and the treatment of woman as other. Men claim, like the West, to know all about men and women. The subjugation of women is worsened by the fact that it is men who give accounts of women’s lives. However, Maria C. Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman in “Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for the Voice of the Woman,” assert that “the claim has been made that on the whole men’s accounts of women’s lives have been at best false, a function of ignorance; and at worst malicious lies, a function of a knowledgeable desire to exploit and oppress” (18). Given the patriarchal nature of society, these accounts are most of the time not objectively presented. Although men’s subjective presentation of women went on for a very long time, it was however, not to go unchallenged. It therefore became imperative for women to give accounts of their own lives which actually reflect their experiences. This explains why from the 1960s, women started writing in their full spirits- bringing in ideas on how women had to deal with silence and speak up for themselves, thus, in one way or the other, promoting the feminist agenda.

Feminism was equally not to go unchallenged as women started to reject generalisations about the term “woman,” without consideration of context. So, out of it was born postcolonial Feminism to address non-white and non-western issues with regard to women’s issues. Gabriella Kamran intimates that:

Postcolonial feminism was born as a response to colonialism, imperialism, and Euro-American feminists’ emphasis on sisterhood, which is one way Euro-American values are imperialistically imposed on other cultures. Postcolonial feminism is an intervention into such problematic frames of thought in hegemonic Euro-American feminism. The theory resists Euro-American feminists’ tendency to universalize the forms of oppression they face in their own lives, a tendency which ignores the crucial differences in the way women from various national, ethnic and religious backgrounds experience gender. (Par 2)

Unlike mainstream postcolonial theory, which focuses on the lingering impacts that colonialism has had on the current economic and political institutions of countries, postcolonial feminist theorists are interested in analyzing why postcolonial theory fails to address issues of gender. They also seek to illuminate the tendency of Western Feminist thought to apply its claims to all women around the world when in reality the scope of feminist theory is limited. In this way, postcolonial feminism attempts to account for perceived weaknesses within both postcolonial theory and within Western feminism.

In line with Feminism, Postcolonial Feminism is a response to feminism with focus mainly on the experiences of women of non-western Cultures. It originated in the 1980s and points out the universalising tendencies of mainstream feminism and the misrepresentation of women living in non-western countries. Cheris Kramarae and Spender Dale

indicate that Postcolonial feminists see the parallels between decolonized nations and the state of women within patriarchy taking "perspective of a socially marginalized subgroup in their relationship to the dominant culture" (5) thus promoting the idea of Metropolitan strongholds and authority. They argue for the fact that their culture has a bearing on their experiences as women and therefore by using the term woman as a universal group, the focus is basically on gender in exclusion of social class, ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation. In The Stockton Postcolonial Studies Project, it is intimated that "Postcolonial feminists critique European and North American feminism for "universalizing" the conditions of women. They argue that the idea of "universal sisterhood" popularized by second-wave American feminism overlooks distinctions of class, race and nationality that exist between women" (Par 3). Therefore, universal sisterhood is fallacious since there are hardly universal experiences. Thus, postcolonial feminists believe that Third world feminism should incorporate the ideas of Third world feminist movements into Western Feminism. To them, their feminism should not originate from the West but rather from "internal ideologies and socio-cultural factors" (Jayawardena, 10). It is on this basis that Chandra Talpade Mohanty reflects on the "sameness" of women, that is, the homogenising of the woman without taking into consideration the contexts. She says:

...the discursively consensual homogeneity of 'women' as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women. This results in an assumption of women as an always-already constituted group, one which has been labelled 'powerless,' 'exploited,' 'sexually harassed,' etc, by feminist, scientific, economic, legal and sociological discourses. (*The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, 262)

Thus, the assumption that all women have always been powerless, exploited and sexually harassed may not hold true. No doubt, Ode Regina in "Women, their Worst Enemies posits that "while in the Western world, there exists the agreement among feminist scholars that women are subjugated, marginalised and therefore need to be liberated, our African scholars are still engaged in a battle of deciding whether our women are really deprived" (81-82) Western feminists propagate this universalism in subjugation in order to preach towards universal sisterhood but they forget to know as Kirsten Holst Peterson says: "...universal sisterhood is not a given biological condition as much as perhaps, a goal to work towards it" (*The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, 251). There are major tenets of Postcolonial Feminists. In an anonymous article titled "Main Tenets of Third world Feminism," the author draws inspiration from Mohanty and observes that "reflection on intersectionality; gender relations considering colonization, race, ethnicity, class; and localization and contextualization of the concepts like 'reproduction, marriage, family, patriarchy, sexual division of labor' are the major tenets of third world feminist theories" (Par 1) It is on the basis of this that I focus on Osonye Tess Onwueme's *Tell it to Women: An Epic Drama for Women* to assess the homogenising of women not based on biological essentials but

on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological essentials. It will be important to examine the (in) appropriateness of promoting the "oneness" and in this case, promote and consider the metropolitan discourses, practices and ideals as the super highway for all woman.

### ELITISM AND THE FALLACY OF UNIVERSAL SISTERHOOD

Elitism in Onwueme's *Tell it to Women: An Epic Drama for Women* is responsible for othering because it has to do with organising society in a way that only a selected few possess power, authority and influence due to the fact that they may be rich, intelligent, educated or in leadership positions. Universal sisterhood is an umbrella concept that brings together women of all shades and spheres of life and unites them under universal subjugation by men, meaning that they have similar experiences and should therefore use similar means to free themselves from patriarchal strongholds. The aim of this section is to underscore the fact that elitist universalist sisterhood that is struggling to impose itself in the play is ideologically misleading.

The marginalisation of women as a discourse is dominantly a Western which suggests that all women share a universal plight. And so, there is need for a universalist solution. This is very essentialist and minimises non-western ideologies and ways of seeing. The marginalisation of women as often propagated in Western discourses most of the time suggest that all women have gone through similar forms of marginalisation. Although some women have issues in their societies that need to be looked into, it is not the same like those claimed by the Western-oriented scholars and believers in the text such as Her Excellency, Ruth and Daisy. Ruth claims if you write an "A" as big as the wall, Her Excellency would not recognise but it is realised that she claims to be educated just because she is associated with the current post-independence leadership which always claim allegiance to the West. So Her Excellency's utterances are seemingly just a parody of what she has heard being sung by her women masters. She says "...It is our time to be heard. For years, women's voices have been oppressed and marginalised, exploited and burdened in the patriarchal hierarchy of the feudalistic hegemony. Women are taking back what belongs to them: freedom, liberty and equality" (199). In the text under study, we do not see marginalisation as such but the need for the improvement of the condition of the women. We get to know about the condition of the woman and the need for such improvement from Adaku's utterances when Daisy and Ruth come to the village to introduce the Better Life for Rural Women programme. She says:

Now it's our time. After so many years of patching our clothes, patching our husbands clothes, patching children's clothes, washing and washing by the river banks. our finger nails 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. At last, after so many seasons, 'Gomenti'- the one who rule us and turn our faces...



something new and bright is here to bring light into our lives! (all eyes turn to Ruth and Daisy, the ultra modern guests from the city) at last, our daughters have become our mouth piece to 'Gomenti.' Is there not a saying among us in Idu that if you begin to eat, you also give your sister and brother their share? (28)

The insinuation here is that the women are in a difficult situation and need a change in their lives. But interestingly, they do not direct their worries to the men or patriarchy although it could be assumed that the government is made up of men primarily. When she refers to Ruth and Daisy as the ones to bring light into their lives, she means that they, the Idu women have probably been living in darkness. The troubles women go through as enumerated by Adaku is symbolic of the darkness and stress they endure to make society move on as they do not take care only of themselves but of men and children. They do not want life to improve just for their sake but for the sake of men and children and therefore, the entire society. It is in line with this that Molaria Ogun-dipe Leslie in "Stiwanism: Feminism in an African Context" intimates that Indigenous Feminism is "about the inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa" (*African Literature*, 550)

From every indication, therefore, the condition of the woman needs to be improved upon. It is for this reason that Okei disagrees with Okeke with regard to the fact that the family boat is sinking because of frivolities of women. He tells Okeke: "Hmmm...my in-law. I do not quite agree with you on that note. There is something...I mean, a certain beauty in this women's movement. We cannot deny them that... What I personally quarrel with is their excesses" (198). From Okei's utterances, it is evident that feminism or wanting to assert the rights of women or seeking the improvement of women lives is not an absurd phenomenon. Molaria Ogun-dipe Leslie, an advocate of indigenous feminism, in line with this asks the following questions:

For those who say that Feminism is not relevant to Africa, can they truthfully say that the African woman is all right in all these areas of her being and therefore does not need an ideology that addresses her reality, hopefully and preferably, to ameliorate that reality? When they argue that Feminism is foreign, are those opponents able to support the idea that African women or cultures did not have ideologies which propounded or theorises woman's being and provided avenues and channels for women's oppositions and resistance to injustice within their societies? (*African Literature* 547)

Of course, the answer is not in the affirmative. The excesses come about and or are reflective of the lack of understanding of context and the struggle to impose ways that are either irrelevant or out of touch with the reality of the current dispensation.

So, the fact that women go through demeaning/difficult experiences, like women the world over, does not translate into the universality of women's experiences. Universal sisterhood, promoted by Metropolitan women, has often been looked at as a way of bringing women under one umbrella especially in terms of the universal marginalisation of women. That is, it is assumed that – all women irrespective of

their class, caste, race, nationality are oppressed and their common enemy is patriarchy, and they therefore need solidarity to fight patriarchy which is a metropolitan tendency. They fail to see that it is these same factors: class, caste, race, nationality and even others that project the differences in sisterhood and begs for different ways of assertion in their various communities. Although it is true that women have been marginalised the world over, the ways of marginalisation are not the same and thus seems like a fallacy to generalise. In the context of Onwueme's *Tell it to Women*, it comes out vividly, given the different worldviews of the different women involved. When Ruth and Daisy try to lure the women to come to town for the Better Life for Rural Women programme, they claim as Ruth says, "...our mission here is the unification of women all over the globe" (34). The issue that arises here is whether there can actually be that unity given that experiences are different. This claim seems to be justified since women all suffer from different forms of marginalisation but the relationship between Ruth and Daisy on the one hand and Yemoja, Adaku and the other rural women on the other hand proves contrary to this. It is realised that their said "unification" is based on gender but as the theorist, Chandra Talpade Mohanty puts it, "sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender. It must be formed in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis" (*The Postcolonial* 262).

The issue of equality seems to raise eyebrows, more especially even, because though the modern women talk about equality, it ends at the level of theory thus making it fallacious. The equality between men and women as they claim it should be is not the least of the concerns of the Idu women because they believe they possess powers that some men do not even possess. In preaching universal sisterhood, Daisy, Ruth and their kind not only go against this reality but go against themselves by looking down on the rural women. The rural woman is treated as the other. No doubt Yemoja laments:

Oh! If only it were just taking orders from men and children! But taking orders from my fellow women? ...taking orders from those I thought were my sisters? Those who led me into this cell with sweet words? Oh, how they spoke of strengths in sisterhood and oneness and equality of men and women...strange how many gaps exist between our world and the world of our new sisters! (101)

The lamentation results from the discrepancy of what the sisters had preached which stands in sharp contrast with what Yemoja is experiencing in the city in the hands of the same women which goes to emphasise the fallacy of Universal sisterhood. Yemoja complains that "[Ruth and Daisy] treat me like a pig. They say my accent is too heavy when I answer the phone. They say my manners are crude and I am a disgrace to womanhood. That is dirt splashed on my face by my fellow women" (67). Ruth and Daisy complain and castigate Yemoja as they put themselves at the centre and relegate Ruth to the margin. Here difference and nurture are seen as weaknesses and the universalising of women is employed on Yemoja. It is for this reason that Yemoja must behave exactly like Daisy and Ruth in order to be considered a true woman. They refuse to understand who Yemoja

is even as Yemoja is trying to understand who they are. Trinh T. Minh-ha rightly posits that "the understanding of difference is a shared responsibility, which requires a minimum of willingness to reach out to the unknown" (*The Postcolonial* 266). Daisy and Ruth completely block their minds in this regard and Yemoja to them is woman-less because she cannot fit into the shoes designed by the modern woman, and thus the controversy of universal sisterhood.

Everything being equal, education should enhance the condition of women and not serve as a dividing line between the Metropolis and rural life. However, Daisy and Ruth who have acquired Western education are behaving like Western intellectuals who like Ketu H Katrak see it "are unconsciously complicit in an endeavour that ironically ends up validating the dominant power structure, even when they ideologically oppose such hegemonic beginnings" (*The Postcolonial* 256). They are so conscious of their othering attitudes and this makes their case even worst, thereby confirming the fact that intellectualism translates into political domination. What is very interesting is this: Yemoja who is considered woman-less, has been chosen by the village women, based on her potential to represent them. Thus, the rejection of Yemoja is symbolically representative of the rejection of the rural women which they claim to be same with and want to provide a better life to. The failure to understand or seek to know other women as they are is the most probable reason for othering. No doubt Okei questions Daisy:

Have you thought carefully about your own world, our own world before you jumped unto this feminist bandwagon? You can't just transfer ideologies from one cultural milieu to another. You better think seriously before you get grounded. You feminists may need to reconsider your politics of confrontation and oppositionality. (93)

Like the colonisers, 'modern' and western-oriented women claim to know rural women more than they know themselves thereby promoting the Metropolitan excesses. A practical example of this attitude in our society is usually seen during Women's Day or other similar festivities where city women take to the rural women what they assume to be the women's needs to them in the form of wheelbarrows, hoes, cutlasses, just to name these rarely seeking their opinions in all these. Thus, like these women, Ruth and Daisy tell them who they are and determine what is good or bad for them, what they should do or not do as women. It is for this reason that when Daisy is getting worried at how deep Yemoja can be as she increasingly feels uncomfortable with her, Ruth shuns her. Also, After making comments showing that they very simplistic, distorting Okei's statement that rural women are simple, Okei, Daisy's husband cautions her thus:

Don't underestimate the power of women...I mean real...rural women. Don't underestimate what you do not comprehend. And don't even try to oversimplify it. The rural women may look shallow to you. Remember as you're stepping unto unsure ground that still waters can run deep. (90)

As Daisy and Ruth will later realise to their greatest disappointment, still waters actually run deep as they do not succeed in their Better Life for Rural Women programme because the women do not see any sense in what they are doing

and they are critical enough to understand that the programme does not reflect their realities and therefore, shun it. Even before now, when Daisy makes Ruth to understand that she is beginning to have hard times with Yemoja, Ruth in her characteristic arrogance responds that Yemoja is "only a village woman. What does she know?" (118). Daisy, having begun to understand Yemoja, posits: "Well, I hope we are not making an error. That woman is deep, deep like the sea and now she's so close to my mother-in-law. Okei adores her too. What for, I cannot tell. I'm losing ground...everywhere..." (118) and gives credence to Postcolonial Feminism. The women's understanding and rejection of this scheme testifies to Okei's statement. The simplicity of the women is seen in the fact that they do not believe in double-standards. They approach life as it presents itself, believing what they see and are told but also critical enough to determine double standards. They do not refuse to go to the city for the Programme because they believe in their fellow women and also in their desire to live a better comfortable life, but the moment their actions and words prove contrary to their promises, they are quick to discern, and therefore, retreat. Just as it was shocking to the colonisers that the colonised did have brains as big as that of the colonisers and could rebel against colonialism, so does it happen to Ruth and Daisy.

The fallacious nature of the Ruth and Daisy is not seen in their lack of critical reasoning and intellectual probity. One impressive and interesting issue is that the women of Idu do not just accept what they are told but they are critical enough as opposed to Daisy and Ruth who claim to be educated but are not critical and or open to other discourses which is supposed to be the true mark of intellectual probity. The implication therefore is that they have just been assimilated and they behave as if they have no brains. However, the rural woman is able to reason well and does not seem to succumb to such assimilationist tendencies. It is for this reason that Sherifat, one of the elderly women of Idu and Daisy's mother in-law cautions her on this as she notices her disregard for Yemoja. She says

Yemoja is a woman just like you. Yemoja is a mother just like you. Yemoja is a wife just like you. You cannot push her around and throw her about like a fading rag. Yemoja too belongs to the world and knows her place in it. How dare you take away her dignity of womanhood? (96)

It is ironical that these are people Daisy and Ruth pretend to want to help and lead them towards a better life. But leadership has not got to do with othering but rather positive influence and making those you lead feel wanted, feel they belong and also see the need to follow you most probably by your example and positive attitudes. Okei tries in vain to caution against their arrogance. He tells Daisy:

...Hey, my learned one, if you want to win the rural woman over, you must come down from your ivory tower and dialogue with them on equal terms, and with respect too. Not this talking down attitude by which you intimidate them from your high altars of academe, from which you flash neon lights to dazzle them. You must be humble to learn from them. (92)

It is not only interesting but also fallacious that it is Okei, a man who rather teaches Daisy about women whereas she

claims to know the women and even preach about universal sisterhood which she fails to practice. Humility is the true mark of leadership and the lack of it on the part of Daisy and her friend implies that they will not succeed in their scheme. Like Karen Higgingbottom states in "Leadership Strategy", "...humility predicts effective leadership. Humility is associated with minimizing status differences, listening to subordinates, soliciting input, admitting mistakes and being willing to change course when a plan seems not to work... I've noticed that without that display of humility, others feel underappreciated and under-valued." (Par 3). All of these are far-fetched in Ruth and Daisy's leadership agenda because of their superiority complex and "know-all" attitude. Othering therefore does not help the woman in the feminist agenda but alienates some women, thereby making it difficult for women to reach a consensus on who they are or what they actually want.

Losing one's identity is also in the scheme of assimilation and othering agenda of the Metropolis as seen in the text. It is one of the problems that Yemoja faces while she is in the city. Yemoja is a well respected woman in her rural community. But when she gets to city, Daisy and Ruth see only an empty Yemoja, nothing short of a house-help and slave. She has to do the menial house chores at all cost and is not even recognised for what she is doing. One of the most important things that one possesses in terms of identity is one's name. To rip it off one's being is tantamount to killing. Yemoja complains to Sherifat: "I know myself. I am Yemoja, the spirit of Yemoja. Idu knows me, but here in the city, I have no name. Nobody knows me...or rather, all they call me is 'she'"(98). She further says:

... Here I am a total stranger, cleaning another's mess, shining another's shoes. Am I still Yemoja? I cannot be sure now. Daily, they push me into the corner and then turn around and stare at me as if I carry shit in my wrapper. Mother Sherifat, you call me Yemoja. The city cares not for my name...It cares not to know my name. The city drowns all names with its hoarse laughter. (100)

Denying to recognise the identity of Yemoja is a way of making her to lose her self-esteem – "an individual's feelings of self worth, his efficacy beliefs and overall wellbeing" (Gilda N. Forbang-Looh 2). The fact that Daisy and Ruth do not want to recognize or respect Yemoja's identity implies that they want to drown it and promote only theirs. They are therefore intolerant of other women and the oneness of women is therefore seriously challenged as they continuously preach it but act contrary.

Witchcraft is something that almost everyone will not want to associate with. Calling someone a witch is insulting. Generally speaking, people always do well to alienate themselves from witches and wizards because of the fear of the negative supernatural influence they may have on them. Daisy tries to dissuade Bose, her daughter, from being in good terms with Sherifat her mother-in-law as she refers to her as a witch. Daisy goes further to tell Bose as Bose puts: "...that we must be careful whenever she is here. We must watch her closely so she doesn't affect us with her voodoo... Mummy also says it's the reason why she doesn't

allow us to go to the village" (109). It is ironical that Daisy wants to claim oneness with Sherifat just because she and Ruth want to achieve their exploitative desires. From Daisy's embarrassment at Bose's pronouncements, it is obvious that she does not say so because Sherifat is a witch perse but because she needs to paint her black in front of Bose who is becoming so fond of Sherifat because of her caring and nurturing attitude. Laretta Ngcobo in "African Motherhood – Myth or Reality" writes of sons who often accuse their mothers of witchcraft against their fathers or wives or even children as a ploy to demote women as she says "[witchcraft] is a common ploy designed to cause the mother's social demotion. It will often be used against a powerful woman when the real aim is to discredit her socially" (*African Literature* 537). It is ironical that in the case of Sherifat, it is rather a daughter (woman), Daisy who does it testifying to her exclusionary tendencies. As it is often said, you give a dog a bad name to hang it. But in this case, it is not an easy ride for Daisy because Sherifat proves herself contrary and even a child as young as Bose is able to recognise that.

The African tradition in general and Idu tradition in particular is very clear on respect especially for the elderly. Thus, anyone who is older than the other in these traditions deserves respect. It is these values that the Western-oriented women like Ruth and Daisy want to erase in the name of emancipation. Subjugating people like Yemoja to some form of slavery is simply elitist and uncalled for just because she has a different cultural orientation from them and because she is of the village and the other party is from the city. Yemoja assists in all the house work and like Sherifat shows Bose much love but Daisy makes Bose to look down on her. It is for this reason that when Okei, Bose's father asks her to respect her and address Yemoja as Sister Yemoja, she says: "Daddy you always talk about respect. Why? And I'm to respect her. And she's just our maid? And the father responds:

It doesn't matter what she or anybody is: maid or gardener or janitor or governor. Just respect people. Learn to respect others. And especially if they're older than you are. And Sissy Yemoja has children. She's definitely much older than you. She could have been your mother, you know? So respect her. She's older than you are. Respect is very important in our tradition. (113)

Thus, respect in an African context, especially for the elderly cannot be over-emphasised. And therefore, playing down only make one to behave like a fish out of water.

Ruth and Daisy in their elitist and othering attitudes are rather seen as social and cultural misfits. This is because though they are from Idu, they claim not to know the culture or do not want to align with it. They consider their culture inferior and the Western culture superior, thus propagating the often postcolonial critical discourses of the superior West and inferior East or the orient/occident dichotomy. To this effect, universal sisterhood can only be fallacious as its claims are not only concomitant with falsehood but even the basis on which it is claimed without regard to context – race, class, nationality, caste, just to name these makes the concept look very much out of place.



### ASSERTIVENESS IN THE FACE OF RURAL-URBAN POLARITIES

The impression one gets about rural women from Ruth and Daisy is that they are primitive, backward, inferior and can be used and dumped since they have no knowledge of who they are and their identity can easily be wiped out if at all they have one, in the face of civilised, outgoing, smart, intelligent and superior women as Ruth and Daisy. It is because of such assessments that Ruth and Daisy think they can do or say whatever and go away with. Ruth says they are:

...simpletons! simpletons! ...That is what village women are. Buy them with some nice presents and with some broad smiles. That's all. They'll follow. When you are done with them, dump them. Your mission will have been accomplished your mission, and they won't know the difference. Rural women are gullible. (118-119)

Even with the much education achieved, it is ironical that they are unable to decipher who these women really are. In this is not only seen the deception in the modern women but also their stupidity and short sightedness. In the text, we see that the Idu women are very different from what Ruth and Daisy perceive.

One of the first things one notices about the Idu women is that they are very unassuming as opposed to the city women. When the women come with the so called programme of Better Life for Rural Women, the women do not prejudge any outcomes till the city women prove them wrong. With the excitement that characterises their coming, Adaku, the oldest, most intelligent and wise woman of the women says:

Our daughters know we too like to ride in big cars and fly like birds in the sky. Our daughters know that we long for clean water; that we too want to stand in the kitchen and turn metals to produce water to run into our bowls like the sky god pouring instant blessing to our bowl of life... We long for light to shine all day long and all night long. We long for the stars that close their eyes like those ones Osime saw when her daughter took her to the city...All these we have longed for in Idu for seasons. And now, our own daughters who know the languages of the powers on their finger tips.(28-29)

This is the women's interpretation of the better life for rural women. They see it as a way of bringing some comfort into their daily lives. Thus, from what they see and hear, they judge the programme as a better source of relief where they can be able to use modern means of transportation, where they can have better comfort in exercising their kitchen duties as having running tap water and also enjoy some electricity supply for their daily affairs. All these is reflected in the images in the above quotation. These are actually the things they believe the women will offer them but it is only when the city women start talking that they become sceptical about them and their motives. While the other women are afraid and timid to castigate the city women for their western tongue, as they seemingly suffer from inferiority complex, the courageous and self-confident Adaku categorically tells them that they have a strange tongue. She tells Ruth:

You people who see these oyibo people and shake and wet your body with urine...(Aloud to Ruth) Yes, our

sister from the Whiteman's land! We the women of Idu, salute you. Your voice is so sweet and your tongue rolls the whiteman's language so smoothly like boiled yam in palm oil. But sister, your tongue sounds strange to us. Your words do not go down. Your words get stuck in our throat. And we do not understand you... (33)

The incomprehension of these women does not end at the literal level but transcends to a metaphorical representation of the rift that exists between the two groups of women, and justifies the fact that women are not one, not only as a result of language orientation but culture as well as other aspects. Thus we find woman-woman othering here thereby indicating the polarities of their worldviews of their actions. Adaku who rejects the inferiority complex being forced down on the women, can be contrasted with Ruth and even Daisy who have fallen so easily for the whiteman's capitalistic ways by believing that their own ways and culture are inferior.

The inferiority complex of Ruth and Daisy is further accentuated by the rejection of their identities. This is seen in the neglect of their African names in favour of Western names such as Ruth and Daisy. Adaku is surprised that Adeke has changed her name to Daisy. Adaku feels quite connected to Daisy (Adeke) when she excitedly believes that it is their own daughters who will rescue them as they "have been pushed around too long by too many strangers" (38). When she enthusiastically says "...Speak Adeke!" the response from Sherifat is that "Her name is no longer Adeke/...She changed her name a long time ago when she left us here" (38). Adaku sees no cultural basis of "Daasi" as she calls it and it therefore has no cultural significance to her. Similarly, in her usual analytical and critical nature, Adaku talks of the different names Ruth was given at birth by her relatives such as Nneka, Nywanyibuife, Egonwanne, Nwa-nne-abuna-oyi, which all had specific meanings to the people who gave the names which Ruth has all rejected for the name Ruth. In all these names, we notice the blood relationship they share which remains paramount and that is why she tells her:

A sister or a brother is not a friend...Because a friend can come and go but you are tied to your sister and brother forever...in this world and the next. That is why we cherish that blood...A name is not just a name. It is something. It means everything. YOUR NAME IS YOU. So now you call yourself Lu-tu? What does it mean to you? What does it mean to us? (44)

Adaku is telling Ruth in other words that she has not only rejected herself but has rejected her people and the relationship and bond that they share, and therefore, uprooted from her culture and consequently suffers from unbelonging because Ruth has no significance for any of them who are inextricably linked to her. Names have a lot significance in one's life and to Adaku, must be taken as such. Therefore, Ruth is lost for as Adaku says, the people who gave her the names "knew where they came from" (45). If Ruth is oblivious of where she is coming from, then she probably will not know where she is going to and be considered incompetent to lead them to the better life she is claiming. One's history is very important in his/her life. It is for this reason that

G. D. Nyamndi in *Whether Losing Whether Winning* stresses on its value. He says:

A projection into the future is another way of returning to the past. Is the future not shaped by the past? That is why to travel into the future we must first return to the past, the better to arm ourselves with the mental and moral strength required for the onward march. The past occupies an important place in the life of any people. (1)

If Ruth has disconnected herself from her past, she obviously has no mental or moral strength to lead the people. It is probably in line with this reason that Adaku asks Ruth the question: "Who are you?" (45). This is a very important question that is asked in identity discourses and it is only after you can truly answer this that you can better situate yourself in society without which you will be considered as floating. Ruth and Daisy are floating individuals because of the effect of colonialism that has made them to debase themselves and their identities. About colonialism and the identity of the colonized, for instance, Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* posits that "[b]ecause it is the systematized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity, colonialism forces the colonized to constantly ask the question 'Who am I in reality?'" (182). Ruth and Daisy have seemingly refused to ask and answer this question and therefore have been swallowed up by a colonial mentality. However, it is Adaku ironically, who is not lettered or educated as Ruth who possesses a PhD and is vying for change of grade to Professor and Daisy who works in the Ministry of Women's Affairs, who schools Ruth on the need to preserve her identity.

The fact that the modern women think they can use charms to deceive the rural women seems to Ruth and Daisy an easy task to accomplish with the belief that they are simpletons. Daisy has an uphill task convincing Sherifat about the coming to the city for the better Life Programme. When she casts doubts about the programme for Better Life, Daisy says:

.... The city has its glamour which our women have been denied for ages just because they are so distant from it. We are committed to equality and justice. And we have made it our duty to bring our rural women to share in the glory of the city; to liberate them from the oppressive claws of tradition, from husbands and from the nightmare of bearing children... (120)

Not only is almost everything wrong with these statements but also the deception with which Daisy brings forth these statements is very annoying. The Idu women do not need the glamour of the city because they are not complaining about the 'non-glamorousness' of their rural area. Secondly, Ruth and Daisy are very distant and continue to distance themselves from the rural women as has been discussed above and therefore, cannot lay any claim to equality and justice. Also, as African women, child bearing is the pride of the Idu and is therefore, not seen as a problem to them. In fact, children are their pride and they are even considered the "firewood" of old age. As Mrinali B. Chavan puts it, "for the women of Idu, motherhood is not simply something imposed on them by men but a means of providing access to power that men can never claim" (252). Thus, talking

about the liberation from the claws of tradition, from husbands and from the nightmare of bearing children just prove that the city women are out of touch with reality. As a matter of fact, these are not issues to the Idu women as they believe in husbands and the bearing of children. Postcolonial Feminists like Molaria Ogundipe, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta advocate feminism that encourages the building of families and reject only those aspects that impinge on women's liberty. Molaria Ogundipe Leslie in "Stiwanism: Feminism in an African Context" for instance, avers that after considering the theories of most visible African women who hold that feminism is relevant to an African context, she among other issues states that "feminism need not be oppositional to men. It is not about adversarial gender politics...women need not neglect their biological roles...motherhood is idealised and claimed as a strength by African women and seen as having a special manifestation in Africa..." (*African Literature* 549). In the same light, Buchi Emecheta in "Feminism with a Small F" says inasmuch as there should be more choices for women to shine in the light of Geraldine Ferara, Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, "...those who wish to control and influence the future by giving birth and nurturing the young should not be looked down upon. It is not a degrading job. If I had my way, it would be the highest paid job in the world." (*African Literature* 556). Thus, motherhood is celebrated and the Idu women are not seeking to overthrow their husbands but rather for complementarity in appropriate cases. This tallies with Nkiru Umechia Nzegwu in *Family Matters* who discusses and is for the dual sex system that existed in pre-colonial Africa as opposed to the monosex system that privileges the man and keeps him as a yardstick for measuring human worth. It is in line with this that when Daisy says it is the male child that determines identity in Idu, Sherifat insists that each sex has its role:

... it is not this or that, like oyibo people. We see the world in circles: the male is male, and the female is female. No one can take the place of 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 or female. It is not a matter of male or female. (126)

Thus, the Western way of seeing the world in exclusive opposites does not apply in the Idu context. Rather than male OR female, it is male AND female. In the face of imposition of Western ideologies and rejection of identities to Idu women therefore, they fight to assert who they are. Inasmuch as they love to be comfortable, they would not trade their dignity for such. It is evident that though the rural women are simple, they are not simpletons as Ruth and Daisy think or come to realise. The polarised positions of the two groups of women are also indicative of the fact that it is not possible for them to be one. So, it is either both Ruth and Daisy see the women as human beings in their own right with an identity and respect them as such or forget about them.

## CONCLUSION

The focus of this paper was on gender representations, difference and the need to understand and preserve one's identity in the face of Western universalist discourses and outlook on life



and impositions. Tenets of the discourses of post colonialism and feminist-gender guided my views as I expounded on the fallacy of universal sisterhood and the need for assertiveness of the Other, in this case, the Idu women in the Urban-Rural polarity issues as seen in the relationship of the rural and urban women in *Tell it to Women*. Woman-woman othering is regarded as a major cause for concern as the city women, though they spend most of their time talking about the need to be united to fight against patriarchy, their actions betray them as words never match action. Besides, the rural women reject claims of universal patriarchy as well as universal means of fighting against it because contexts are different. What is considered patriarchy in one context may not necessarily be so in another context as one gets from the text under study. Therefore, the modes of assertion must be context-bound. Besides as Kirst Holst Peterson rightly states, in order to achieve universal sisterhood, those concerned must work towards it because it is not a given biological condition. It is clear from the analysis that there is need for the respect of rural women who, most of the time, are considered people without an identity and who do not matter and therefore, can be comfortable with any identity imposition. This type of attitude falls in line with the colonising attitude which has been strongly criticised by Postcolonial Feminists. Thus, the need for the reorientation of the modern intellectual woman towards the rural woman is very necessary as uncritically propagating western discourses in non-western spaces has remained unproductive and will for a long time be so.

#### END NOTES

1. As far as party politics in Cameroon is concerned, I do not belong to any political party but am a keen observer and critique of their activities especially those with women at the forefront.

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