Criticism of the Boy Child Preference in Africa by Selected Nigerian Playwrights

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Abstract

Many African playwrights have consistently criticised the emphasis that Africans place on the boy child. These playwrights have done so by projecting the pain and anguish that women who are unable to bear a male child are subjected to in their plays, the attendant stigma and downright condemnation and hostility of all and sundry towards them. They have further explicated this issue by graphically detailing how the girl child is disdained, maligned or outrightly rejected in most occasions because she was not the expectation of the parents who would have preferred a boy child in her stead. They further expose how the girl-child is denied educational opportunities or even 'sacrificed' to make the boy child comfortable either by being 'sold' off to pay for his fees or lacking the attention of the parents in accessing some other basic needs of life. This plaintive cry by most of these playwrights is a reaction to the 'voracious' appetites and premium placed on the male child to the detriment of the girl child. This paper investigates the phenomenon of the male child preference in selected plays from Nigeria. A content analysis of these plays is made to highlight this phenomenon which projects the sociological realities in many African communities whether traditional or modern. Findings by this study indicate that the quest for heirs among Africans and the

erroneous views in some quarters that the boy child is more important than the girl child, among other issues, is responsible for the boy child preference in Africa. This has the result of inflicting serious psychological trauma on women who are pressured as a result of the quest for the boy child.

1. Introduction

It is true to say that the boy child is preferred in many cultures, not just in Africa but in many other parts of the world. In the ancient past, even kings have been known to divorce their wives because they have failed to give them male children. In 506 BC the king of Anaxandridas of Sparta divorced his wife because she could not give him a male child (Engels 70). It is commonly understood in the history of England, too why a crave for a son by King Henry VIII led to the breakaway of the church in England just because the Pope refused to annul his marriage to Catherine which would have given him the chance to marry Ann Boleyn of whom he thought he had the guarantee of getting a male heir to his throne (Ashworth 18).

In his desperation to actualise this, he declared himself the supreme leader of the church in England leading to the historic break away from Rome, not on doctrinal disagreement, but because of the politics of crown inheritance. In spite of the fact he succeeded in marrying Ann Boleyn, he still could not get a male child from her. She gave birth to Elizabeth who ultimately became the queen of England. The king was, however, not satisfied with the girl child fearing that she will not be able to "consolidate Tudor power and maintain the fragile peace following the Wars of the Roses" (Wilkinson 70). He needed a boy child to achieve this. This sadly resulted to the execution of Ann Boleyn.

In Africa, premium has always been placed on the boy child to the detriment of the girl child. This is more so compelling given the serious emphasis on the bloodline. The male child has a pride of place in the African home. In traditional agrarian societies, he is needed both as warrior to defend the community against external aggression and also as a worker that helps with a bigger expansion of the farms for more yield. In spite of modernisation, this premium placed on the boy child has not completely gone away. There is still an obsession for the male child in many African societies. This paper investigates the reasons for this obsession. It also analyses the criticisms of this phenomenon by various playwrights, especially from Nigeria.

2. The Boy child Preference syndrome in Africa

It is an indisputable fact that the boy child is much more preferred in Africa than the girl. A lot of reasons have been advanced for this gender preference. According to Chinoda, given the patriarchal nature of many African tribal nationalities, the sociological conditioning places more premium on the male child because he will ensure the continuation of "a close knit family, thereby enlarging one's generation" (60). Code affirms this when she avers that in Africa, the boy child is more likely to be preferred because he "can maintain the patriarchal system" (61). It can be suggested therefore that the quest to continue to have the final say in matters of the family, which patriarchy invests on men, engenders the voracious appetites for the boy child. Offiong puts it thus:

> Patriarchal inheritance which is evident in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa…results in the status of women being unequal to that of men and gives the power of succession and leadership to the boy child. This endows the boy child with power and authority that makes him preferred to the

female child because the former *preserves the family name* (50 Emphasis Mine).

This desperation many a time, driven by the quest of especially the man to have as many sons as possible, compel the women, who bear the greater burden of child bearing to have more children than they ordinarily would have preferred to (Howard 202, Bahemuka 130).

This therefore means that in Africa, it is not enough for one to have children. No matter the number of children that one may have, inasmuch as they are not male children, the person may not command the respect accorded to another person who may have even if it is one child alone but who is male. By way of a hierarchical arrangement therefore, not having children at all is an anathema. It attracts the lowest level of respect in society. However, a person whose children are female is almost on the same level with the first one mentioned above because there is very little respect accorded the girl child viewing her more as a liability than an asset. On the scale of 1 to 3, the highest is three and one only achieves it because he has male children, plenty of them.

That is why the Woman penitent in Soyinka's *The Trial of Brother Jero* undergoes the worst kind of psychological trauma. She is so desperate to have a child so much that she screams and shouts the most in her agony seeking for the stigma to be taken from her. However, we do not get a better presentation in Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House* where we witness vicious violence visited on Nneora by her husband because she only bears girl children for him. Of the three children they had, all of them were girls. This engendered a heavy depressing atmosphere in the home with the husband perpetually snarling at her and the children whom he spares little affection. In *Edewede,*

Edewede's mother-in-law even taunts her as having no child at all because the only child in the family is a girl.

It is however, noteworthy to mention that the issue of boy child preference is not limited to the continent of Africa alone. This phenomenon exists elsewhere, even in highly industrialised countries of the world. A survey conducted by *Couponcodes4u* and reported by Peppers of the *Daily Mail* indicates a significant percentage of the respondents indicating their preference for a boy child, especially the first because, in their view, "having a son will be 'less hard work' than a daughter" (*http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2309911/How-majority-couples-want-BOY-child-hard-work-girls.html*). A 2011 Gallup poll in America also shows a high degree of boy child preference by parents (*(http://www.gallup.com/poll/148187/Americans-Prefer-Boys-Girls-1941.aspx).*

The reasons adduced to this range from the fear that girls can easily be mistreated to the suggestion that girls are also "undervalued" in America and seen more as sex objects (*http://www.alternet.org/story/151602/boy_or_girl_why_do_more_americans_prefer_male_children*).

According to Hvistendhal, in India and China, there is selective infanticide of the girl child because of the high premium placed on the boy child. She further suggests that the policy of the one child per family in china has resulted on a huge pressure exerted on families who, using new technology, are able to choose to keep the child if he is male or do away with it if it is found to be a girl child, while the payment of dowries of the girl child by parents has resulted in many Indians preferring the boy child (69). Hvistendhal concludes that any country that places premium on the boy child suffers demographic imbalance. Hudson and den Boer remark that "high sex ratio societies…are governable only by

authoritarian regimes capable of suppressing violence at home and exporting it abroad through the colonization of war" (qtd. in Hvistendhal 224). The suggestion is that where there is a surplus of men, there is the likelihood of belligerency happening. In China, the one child policy has had a terrible effect on the girl child. Grady reports that many girl children get "thrown into rivers, left on doorsteps or abandoned in forests" (15).

3. Effects of the Boy child Preference Syndrome

One of the effects of the male child preference is the encouragement of polygamy; this can come through a number of factors. It is generally understood that in Africa, and as a result of the quest to have large families so as to help with the agrarian economy, men are constrained to marry many wives to bear them children. Of course it has been established already that of these many children, male children are preferred. However, there are other factors that result which have a direct bearing on the male child preference.

Many a time polygamy results because of the need to have male children. A husband who has not got male children may resort to marrying a second wife to realise his dream of doing so. In spite of the rancorous relationship that results from sheer competition between the wives for the attention of the husband, the lure of having the upper hand in the family dynamics inextricably draws women to many of these loveless relationships because of the respect that having male children accords them.

Probably, the argument that will be advanced to address this issue lies in adoption. This will mean that the man can as well adopt a male child in case of his wife not giving birth to one. The problem, however, is that adoption is a very foreign culture in Africa and many people will never consider that in spite of their exposure. A

number of reasons have been advanced to as to why Africans detest adoption some of which include the fact that it is expensive but fundamentally that "if we didn't pop it out from our vagina, we most likely don't want the responsibility of someone else's kid" *(https://thoughtcatalog.com/raylynn-daniels/2013/09/the-real-reason-more-blacks-dont-adopt-and-the-reasons-not-slavery/)*. As crude as the statement made above is, this is the frank truth about many Africans.

Apart from volunteering to take care of a relations kid, culture does not allow one to just go grab a child from nowhere. It is almost always not allowed. Thinane-Epondo while agreeing on this further explicates the complication of adoption by maintaining that in traditional societies, an adopted child will "never be accepted by the ancestors" *(http://mgafrica.com/article/2015-11-08-why-is-it-an-issue-when-white-people-adopt-black-babies)*. Obviously because he/she does not share a bloodline with them. The related issue to this according to Thinane-Epondo concerns inheritance whereby the adopted child may be discriminated against given his/her disadvantaged status in the home.

Renny Mutsa Tsikai succinctly captures this in her novel *Skeletons: Arms of a Stranger* where Rose who had been divorced by her husband for being barren tries to adopt a child. Her mother will, however, have none of that as she reminds her that "in our Africa culture, we don't adopt children from nowhere. We look after our own relatives. Our culture refuses that kind of adoption" (p. 18).

Another effect of the boy child preference is the instability that results in the home between wives. Ilo avers that there is never any atmosphere of peace in family as a result of the spirit of competition among the wives and even among the siblings themselves (195). Each of them strives hard to outdo the others in

bearing children especially male children. Consequently, they suffer from debilitating diseases; their constitutions get weakened and the end up aging fast. Some even die in the process of trying to gratify their husbands with more children even when they have been medically pronounced to be unfit (Ilo 196). As they grow older, the men marry younger, fresher women while they get discarded. This in turn puts them in a serious psychological state. Furthermore, as a result of the large families being raised, illiteracy will most certainly be found among such people. This happens because there isn't enough money to go round in educating the many children in the home. Of course studies indicate that in most occasions, it is the girl child who gets sacrificed for the sake of education, because he is the preferred sex (Waithera 33).

4. Criticism of Boy child Preference by Nigerian Playwrights

Playwrights in Nigerian have criticised the boy child preference from a more subtle angle. What they have done is to document the way the boy child is preferred by highlighting how the girl child is not preferred. It is either that the girl child is denied access to education while all the resources of the family are showered on the boy child or subjecting her to other forms of discriminatory practices in other to make the life of the boy child comfortable. Right from childhood, she is socialised into seeing her place as just the kitchen. The boy child on the other hand is allowed to launch out into a life of adventure and exploration.

In Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods,* Ogwoma is literally sold off to Adigwu so as to raise money to get medication for her brother who was very ill. Once again, the boy child is preferred to the girl child. Her opinion was of no consequence. Everything must be done to preserve the family tradition. After all she will marry and leave. She is not considered much of a member of the

family. Consequently, the tragedy that ensued was a direct result of this thoughtless mindless treatment of the girl child to satisfy the boy child. Ogwoma ended up committing a sacrilege.

In *Nneora: The African Doll's House* by Tracie Chima-Ezeajugh, preference for the boy child also gets attention. Once again, the playwright succeeds in doing this through the deliberate obsession by Ikenna, Nneora's husband, has for the non-existent boy child. He is so difficult to deal with, of a gloomy constitution and unreachable to his wife. This is a woman that literally sacrifices everything for him. She sponsors him to school after picking him from the streets as a worn out applicant, frustrated and weighed down by the vicissitudes of life. However, her troubles begin when she is unable to bear a boy child for him. To the count of four, the children are all girls and so this gets him so riled that at the slightest of provocations he flares up. Even the children are not spared his rancorous attitude:

> **Ikenna:** (getting worked up) I mind. The thought of those your noisy girls! They practically make the house unliveable. I think we should send them to the village for the holidays.
>
> **Nneora:** Ikenna! How can you speak about your children like that? How can you think of sending them to the village. Our children should spend Christmas holidays with us, afterall, they have already spent two weeks with my sister.
>
> **Ikenna:** Then they should spend more days with your sister. Having four noisy girls in the house can be quite distracting, I need a quiet environment for my work (p.36).

Ikenna speaks typically as a man, especially a man whose ego is bruised. Since the children are all girls, they have become 'your' children; his wife's children. They have no worth in his estimation

so they belong to their mother. Their mere presence is an irritation to him. However, later in the play when his wife gets pregnant, his inscrutable tight face devoid of any friendliness burst into a beatific smile as he caresses his wife's bulging belly mouthing praises for the son to be born:

> **Ikenna:** I can't wait to know the sex of the baby. If the baby is a boy, I will throw an extravagant Christmas party. In fact, I will fly the whole family to NICON NOGA HILTON Hotel, Abuja.
>
> **Nneora**: Ikenna! I thought you said we should not waste money.
>
> **Ikenna:** Any amount I spend in my son's arrival is worth the price (p.38-9).

Ikenna even promises to buy the wife just about everything but importantly, he stresses that their love "will take a new turn" (p.39). This indicates how delicate the relationship has been. There has not been peace because of the quest for the boy child.

Emmy Unuja Idegu's *Six and Half a Dozen* comes out strongly and brazenly against boy child preference. In the case of Baba, a prototype of the male ego, he was not even willing to wait for the birth of another child before he descends heavily and brutally against Mama his wife for failing to give him a boy child.

> **Baba:** Don't Maigida me. (Fumming) sic. Answer me before I lose my understandably fragile temper.
>
> **Mama:** But…I already have a child for you.
>
> **Baba:(**Greatly upset. He slaps her hard on the back. She staggers and falls on her face). You call that one child**.** You dare to call that thing child?
>
> **Mama:** Is is…is is..is Ladi no longer your child?
>
> **Baba: (**Moving aggressively closer towards her**)**. Will you close your booming mouth you fool. Can't you borrow a

> good example from Hassana, Jummai, Amina and Talatu, my friends' wives (p.7-8).

The example he wants her to borrow has to with the fact that all these women mentioned gave birth to male children. Since she could not give birth to a boy child, she has disgraced him given that he cannot hold up his head among his friends. His ego has been bruised and so he beats and kicks her the more swearing that he will have nothing to do with the child. Later in a conversation with Adamu his friend, who commiserates with him over his misfortune, he declares that to be called a father is only when one has sired male children.

However, Baba undergoes a transformation for the better when Mama now delivers a baby boy. His joy is full. His hitherto moody and cranky disposition changes to a fulfilled man, full of smiles and effusive as he holds up his head high and proud now that he has got a boy child. He could not hide his happiness from his friend Adamu who has once again come to share, only that this time it is in his moment of joy.

> **Baba:** For the first time in my marriage life I feel fulfilled and accomplished. (Laughing) I will invest all my resources on my male- child. I owe my son my life.
>
> **Adamu:** Kwarai wallahi. What else? You now have a male child, a male child that will bear your name long after your death.
>
> **Baba**: Now I know what it is to be a father (p.16).

In his moment of euphoria, Baba even declares that one son is "greater than one thousand and one girls" (p.17). As for Ladi, his daughter, as far as Baba is concerned, she does not even exist. He refuses to spend even a kobo on her school fees. Mama has to scrounge from her petty trading to pay her school fees. Abu, her

brother, on the other hand is dotted over by her father. He gives him all he has to make him comfortable in his studies.

The same way Ikenna fusses over his wife and her pregnancy with the expectations of the delivery of a boy child is the same way Stella Oyedepo in *Brain has no Gender,* presents in almost a farcical way how Alani engages the services of drummers to come and start a celebration when his wife goes into the labour room for his 17th child whom he is very sure was going to be a boy child. Earlier on he has been made to engage in the most despicable activities, all in the name of preparing himself for the birth of a boy child. Because his wives have always given birth to girl children, he went to a *Babalawo* who instructed him to dance around town in his best clothes so as to ward off the bad luck of perpetually fathering girl children. This particular activity is even dignifying given the previous tasks he had been made to engage in. In the first instance, he was instructed to eat the faeces of a pig for seven days so as to cure himself of this bad luck. When this did not yield any fruit, he was made to walk around with a big toad tucked under his scrotum to convert his sperm from female making to male making sperms. His gross display of ignorance typifies the attitude of most men when it comes to the issue of child birth. In his view, it his strength that should grant him this power of procreation of the boy child. This is how he paints the picture to the *Babalawo:*

> **Alani:** That is true. I tell you Baba, mine has been an unusual ill-luck. It isn't that I am impotent. If I had been paralysed between the thighs, it would have been a different matter. Ah…ha…women acknowledge my masculine power. Baba, is it not a bitter irony that I, the same one whose masculine power is stronger than that of a horse should father sixteen female children with no male

> child. No single male child, not even a premature one as evidence of my potency? (p.10).

The *Babalawo* acquiesced with his position, probably to be able to squeeze out more money from him. So he tells him that it is the "handiwork of witches".

It should be noted that in Africa, it is much easier to attribute every unfortunate phenomenon as directly caused by evil forces- even something as scientific as the issue of a child's identity. This is what Evans Pritchard affirms when he uses the case of Azande as a tribal nationality. He underscores their belief system as basically proceeding as well as directly impacted by witchcraft. In this quote, he explicates how witchcraft is "ubiquitous" touching every aspect of the lives of the Azande people and by extension most other African tribal nationalities:

> If blight seizes the ground nut crops it is witchcraft; if the bush is vainly scoured for game it is witchcraft; if termites do not rise when their time is due and a cold useless night is spent in waiting for their flight it is witchcraft; if a wife is sulky and unresponsive to her husband it is witchcraft; if a prince is cold and distant to his subjects it is witchcraft; if a magical rite fails to achieve its purpose it is witchcraft; if, in fact, any failure or misfortune falls upon anyone at any time and in relation to his manifold activities of his life it may be due to witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 63-64).

Evans-Pritchard concludes that the meagre scientific knowledge of the African denies them the ability to understand that most phenomena can be explained scientifically and that certain misfortunes arise as a result of "miscalculation, incompetence or laziness" (64). As far fetching as this assertion may seem, it stands to reason that there is an element of truth. And inasmuch as we may be tempted to relate this assertion with traditional societies,

even the 21st century African still exhibits residues of this cultural engineering. The setting of the stories is not in the primitive past but within the developed societies of the 20th and 21st centuries. After all both Somo and Ladi went to school- modern schools. Ladi was employed by a petrochemical company. Somo became a Medical doctor. Even though Alani in *Brain has no Gender* and Baba in *Six and Half a Dozen* can be said to be 'illiterates' Ikenna in *Nneora: An African Doll's House* was a successful banker and educated in the Western sense. The playwrights are therefore reifying issues that are nascent within the cultural matrix of Nigeria; where Western education with its 'civilizing' influence has yet to efface this primordial belief and obsession of the preference of the boy child.

5. Subverting the Boy child Preference in Drama

The disgust of Nigerian playwrights over this obsession for male children by men is demonstrated in their play texts. In the case of the texts we have analysed in this paper, the playwrights succeed in doing this by either constructing the boy child to end up as a failure. On the other hand, the girl child is now empowered to succeed and be of tremendous help to the father who had earlier rejected her as, probably as good as a bargaining chip for a high bride price.

Ogwoma, in Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods,* in a fit of vindictive anger refuses to observe the mandatory period of mourning when Adigwu, her husband, dies and further commits sacrilege by sleeping with Uloko, her heartthrob, whom she was denied marrying because he did not have money. Oyedepo and Idegu, however, disparage the boy child the more by constructing him as more of a liability than the girl child. To achieve this, they empower the girl child. In *Brain has no Gender,* Somo, the girl

rejected by her father and literally sold off to an old man more than three times her age as wife runs away and take to schooling. The father curses her and frets. At a point in time, he even forgets her. She, however, graduates from school and qualifies as a medical doctor coming tops in her class by beating all the other boys. She returns to the village in pomp and pageantry radiant in her hard fought freedom and status. She takes care of the father and becomes a strong pillar of the family materially and spiritually. The father is shamefaced. He tearfully asks Somo for forgiveness.

A similar situation plays out in Idegu's *Six and Half a Dozen.* In this particular case, though, the playwright subverts the emphasis on the boy child by making Abu irresponsible. He squanders his father's money in school and joins up with friends of questionable character, indulging in all manner of revelry. At a point in time, he gets withdrawn from the university because of poor performance. In a reversal of roles, Abu, of whom the father has a lot of expectations, disappoints him. Ladi, who is rejected right from birth, turns out as the pillar in the family, too. She graduates as a petroleum engineer and is employed and earns a good salary. Just as Somo, she also returns to the village to save her father who is critically ill and needs financial intervention for him to continue to be attended to. Even the doctor is shocked that she is able to pay the N145, 000 needed for his medication. Just as in the case of Somo, too, Baba Ladi's father is ashamed of his actions and earlier mistreatment of his daughter. He begs for forgiveness confessing his ignorance but at the same time affirming the importance of every child.

6. Conclusion

This paper delved into the controversial issue of the boy child preference, especially in Africa. We discovered that, indeed, there

is an overarching desire by men to sire male children chiefly because of the propagation of one's bloodline. Women have tended to be in the receiving end of this quest given that when the male children are not forthcoming, they suffer partner abuse. The paper suggests that it's not about the gender of the child but what the child can do. In this case it has been demonstrated that the girl child is even more sympathetic and caring than the so much sought after boy child. It is both an issue that finds expression in drama but as well in real life.

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