



Towards A Mission: An Analysis of Ethnic Stereotype, Gender Relations, Themes and Characterisation in Julie Okoh's *Aishia*

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Abstract

Original Research Article

The work interrogated issues of ethnic stereotype, gender relations, theme and characterisation in Julie Okoh's *Aisha*. The above concerns as evidently dramatised in *Aisha* are foundational issues that deter harmonious relationships in most marriages in society. These issues that the playwright queries in her dramatic court pose as teething challenges to scholars, activists and marriage counselors in proffering lasting solutions to the problems. It is on the above assertion that it becomes imperative for the researcher to carry out this investigation with a view to unraveling the immediate and remote causes of ethnic stereotype, gender inequality and other sundry inadequacies that create disharmony in marital institutions. This will be examined and analysed in line with the presentation of the themes, characters and characterization in the play. This is because themes and characters are vehicles that convey the playwright's social vision, thought and motif. To effectively analyse the topic under review, the work employs African feminist theory and feminist performance criticism as critical platforms for analysis. This qualitative study explores analytical, literary and sociological approaches and methodology. It is the modest recommendation of this research that obnoxious ethnic and gender stereotypes should be discouraged in society in order to cultivate a genuine marital relationships devoid of bias and acrimony.

Keywords: Mission, Theme, Gender Relationships, Drama/Theatre and Analysis.

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Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact ethnic stereotypes and gender inequality are disturbing phenomena, especially in the Nigerian nation. These factors constitute major causes that thwart cordial and harmonious relationships in most marriages in Nigeria in particular, and Africa in general. It is therefore on the foregoing assertion that playwrights, activists, and social commentators have, in their various platforms, carried out investigations on the aforementioned issues of

concern. Dramatists (playwrights) have, in their creative capacities, dramatised issues bordering on ethnic sentiment, stereotype, and gender disaggregation in their dramatic works. It is noted that African dramatic literature has long served as a crucial medium for social critique, cultural investigation and ideological force. It is on the foregoing claim scholars inform that from the precolonial era to contemporary dramatic literature, African drama and theatre have discussed issues that relate to ethnicity, gender relationships, and the organization of family



institutions. To be specific, in the Nigerian context, playwrights have on many occasions emphasised the institution of marriage as a veritable dramatic source by which the contradictions of patriarchal ideology, ethnic stereotypes, cultural and traditional discourse are x-rayed. In this connection, marriage, which is idealised as a space for social stability and continuity, in most cases, has turned into a place of female vulnerability and assault where women's bodies are subjected to unhealthy cultural examination and obnoxious patriarchal ideologies.

Furthermore, most marriage relationships have been destroyed due to cultural bias, ethnic stereotypes, and patriarchal ideology. To this end, these factors have reduced effective, genuine love and committed marriage affections in terms of inter-communal and ethnic engagements.

To achieve harmony in marriage relationships, Nigerian dramatic literature (Julie Okoh's *Aisha* inclusive) has increasingly responded to this reality by foregrounding women's experiences of productive injustice as well as exposing the cultural myths and other traditional values and authority. As a feminist playwright, Julie Okoh, in her dramatic voyage, questions and exposes the patriarchal bent that relegates women to the background. In *Aisha*, Okoh interrogates the intersections of gender, infertility, ethnicity, and patriarchy within the institution of marriage in contemporary Nigerian society. It is hopeful that in the course of critical analysis and evaluation of this work, the researcher will x-ray blow-by-blow issues bordering on ethnic stereotypes and gender relations with particular focus on themes and characterization.

The Synopsis of *Aisha*

Set in contemporary African society, the play is a paradox of ethnic and stereotypical disharmony in marriage institutions in the Nigerian society. The story surrounds Aisha, a Kanuri-Hausa/Fulani young woman in her early thirties (30s), who is married to Ehimare, of Yoruba/Edo origin. Unfortunately, Aisha's marriage to her husband has been without children. This

childless situation has attracted insults from her mother-in-law, Adesua Osakue. To this end, Adesua Osakue advises her son, Ehimare, to remarry in order to have children, while attributing Aisha's childlessness to her tribe. She further claims that the reason Aisha is barren is that the spirits of her ancestors are against her because she comes from the northern part of the country. However, Ehimare informs his mother that Aisha's barrenness is caused by his medical condition; hence, he suffers from low sperm count. In the interest of peace, Ehimare agrees to marry a second wife from his village in order to please his mother. At this point, Ehimare performs the traditional marriage rite on Etemini (his new wife). In a dramatic twist, the unveiling of the bride reveals Aisha, the supposedly new wife of Ehimare. Since the marriage rites and blessings have already been conducted, Ehimare has no other choice but to marry Aisha, his beloved wife. At this dramatic moment, Chike delivers a letter from Ehimare's medical doctor to him, which indicates that the pregnancy test carried out by Aisha confirms that she is pregnant. The play, therefore, ends in a joyous mood.

Theoretical Framework: A Focus on African Feminist Theory and Feminist Performance Criticism.

This work is anchored on African feminist theory and feminist performance criticism as a roadmap for critical analysis of the topic under interrogation. It is a known fact that the African feminist concept and idea focus on the particularity of African women's life experiences, as it critically interrogates the cultural base that sustains gender inequality. Revealing the nature and characteristics of African feminism, it asserts that "African feminism is a radical proposition: it refers to the laboratory political philosophies, theories, writings, research and cultural production, as well as the organizing work of the transnational community of feminists from Africa." (Mama, 2019, p. 1). It further reveals that "African feminist thought refers to the dynamic ideas, reflections, theories, and other expressions of intellectual practices by politically radical

African women concerned with liberating Africa by focusing on women's liberation, and as such cannot be easily defined or captured." (p. 1). It is also noted that African feminism foregrounds community, family, and cultural milieu as veritable sources of oppression and struggle. On the contrary, however, feminist performance criticism helps in the analysis of how theatrical form, narrative style, and technique function to reinforce or rather change prevailing gender norms in society. It is posited that:

Feminist performance artists revolutionised the form and turned it into a powerful political response through cultural intervention and the assertion that the "personal is political". Rejecting the neutral male genius trope that had been considered essential to conventional art, the feminist mantra asserted that "lived experience is the ground from which all politics come," and art is not exempt from politic." (Simonson, 2018, p. 1).

The deliberate use of these theories provide an adequate analytical paradigm for explicating how Julie Okoh's *Aisha* represents, questions, and rethinks women's reproductive abilities within the space of African socio-cultural environment.

Ethnic Stereotype: A Conceptual Clarification

In revealing the concept and characteristics of ethnic stereotype, Gardner R. C. *et al.* (1969) contend that "ethnic stereotypes are beliefs people have about the characteristics of groups of people. In research on ethnic stereotypes, however, emphasis is usually placed on those attributes which most people agree characterise another group, thus emphasising consensus in the definition of the stereotype." It is asserted that such stereotypes may develop due to common experiences that exists among a group of people with a focus on noticed stereotyped group or association inherent in society.

It is further claimed that stereotypes evolve within communities and influence how

people from the same group behave towards one another and towards people belonging to other groups. (www.journals.co.za). According to Zhukova, T.A., *et al.* (2024):

Ethnic stereotypes in intercultural communication are a phenomenon that can hinder understanding and harmony between different cultural groups. These simplistic prejudices and erroneous generalisations can have a negative impact on intercultural interactions, perpetuating discrimination, and disrespect towards certain ethnic communities. In this article, we will explore the concept of intercultural communication and outlines the barriers it faces, such as linguistic and cultural differences. It aims to establish a comprehensive theoretical groundwork for the discourse around ethnic stereotypes, illustrating how they form, persist, and complicate intercultural dialogue.' (p. 2)

Theme of Ethnic Stereotype and Violence in *Aisha*

The thematic thrust of Julie Okoh's *Aisha* centres on ethnic stereotypes. In the play, Aisha is presented as a victim of ethnic stereotypes and prejudice. Aisha's inability to bear children is attributed to her ethnic origin. This is because their marriage is perceived as an unacceptable inter-ethnic marriage, as the dramatic action reveals Aisha as a Kanuri-Hausa/Fulani woman married into a Yoruba/Edo family. Her inability to conceive is always interpreted as a spiritual and cultural incompatibility rather than a biological problem. The theme of ethnic stereotype is noticed through the character of Adesua Osakue, Ehimare's mother, who epitomises ethnic sentiment and obnoxious patriarchal ideology. To further complicate the matter, Adesua Osakue advises her son, Ehimare, to take an Edo wife who will bear children for him, while claiming that the reason Aisha could not have children is that she comes from the northern part of the country. She strongly argues that the ancestral spirit would not

favour a woman who is not from their tribe. She says to her son thus, “Yes, son. They come back to life through their favourite children. They have turned their back on you because you have defied our traditions by marrying a stranger into our family” (Okoh, 2025, p. 34). Adesua Osakue tormented her because she was from the North, recollecting the experience of her ancestors in the hands of the Northerners from war as an excuse. She says to Ehimare thus:

No! No! No! It is not the same thing. Hausa are too dangerous. They are ready to kill without thinking. They have no human feelings. How can you forget so soon what they did to us... See how they are still killing the southerners living in their land like rats. Right from the time of civil war till today, any small thing they burn down houses. They burn churches. They burn down properties worth millions of naira, belonging to southerners (p. 30).

The above assertion reveals that Adesua Osakue stereotypes everybody from the North as killers and bad people as she strongly detests them, hence, the reason for hatred and maltreatment towards her innocent daughter-in-law, Aisha. In the light of the above, Okoh emphasises the issues of genuine love and forbearance in order to encourage people from different cultural subgroups to unite and work together towards building a progressive nation. The playwright also discussed other important matters such as true love and inter-ethnic relationships in the Nigerian multi-ethnic nation. The message of love was through Ehimare and Aisha; in one of the many arguments with his mother. The playwright’s authorial voice is made manifest in the dialogue of Ehimare thus:

I have offended neither the living nor the dead. Mother, listen carefully to me. Love is the silent language of life. Without love there can be no communication to friendship. But with love, people of different cultural backgrounds can become unified into one body and soul. I love my wife. Nothing

can separate me from her. If God gives us a baby, that child will be the symbol of the love between us. If not, let the love itself serve to teach everyone that it is only the fume of genuine love that can burn off the claws of the tribal sentiments tearing apart in the country (2005, pp. 34-35).

The issue of love was also treated with importance, as well as the negativities of ethnic stereotyping. This is because the answer to all forms of violence is love. The social vision of the playwright explains that the people can be appreciated better when they are given a chance to better their lives. To support the above statement, Ehimare says “there is no culture that is entire by itself. Open your heart and try to understand other people and their culture. If you do, you will be able to appreciate Aisha for what she is. She is a good woman” (2005, p. 31).

Character and Characterization in *Aisha*

Aisha Osakue: She is the protagonist of the play and a young lady in her early thirties. Aisha is a strong character and a good woman from the northern part of Nigeria, Kanuri who is married to Ehimare Osakue from a mixed ethnicity of Yoruba and Edo. Aisha was raised in Lagos, where she lived with her parents. She is a university graduate. Aisha is deeply in love with Ehimare, whom she later marries and vows to spend the rest of her life with. In a dramatic twist, Aisha is blessed with the fruit of the womb; having gone through series of emotional and physical abuses from Ehimare’s mother as a result of childlessness. This is revealed through Adesua Osakue thus:

Heh! Heh!! Heh!!! What is love? Is it love that will fetch him water when he is old and feeble? Is it your love that will stand up in his place when he is too frail to face the challenges from stronger ones? Is it your love that will mourn him when he crosses over to his ancestors? No, young lady, your love may fade and you go your different ways, but a child is there to stay forever. Love my foot (p. 20).

Ehimare Osakue: He is a graduate and husband to Aisha Osakue. Ehimare was born in Edo and raised in Lagos. Ehimare is a brilliant young man, adventurous and well-to-do. A responsible man, devoted to his work and family, Ehimare believes in inter-ethnic relationships, hence, leading him to employ the services of members of various ethnic groups in the Nigerian nation to work for him. As the dramatic action progresses, Ehimare was later revealed as the cause of their childlessness. This is because he suffers from low sperm count. Consequently, however, he was pressured by his mother, Adesua, to take a second wife from Edo, which he agreed to and moved on with the plan. In the end, Ehimare marries Aisha traditionally and later confirmed to be pregnant. Ehimare is a strong-willed character who believes in true love and self-convention thus frowns at tribal sentiment; as he advises his mother thus:

Is it only in the North? What about the community violence in the South? The Ogbakiri people in Rivers State have been fighting each other for years. Riot and war will continue to burst out in this country as long as the people refuse to listen to each other. As long as we cannot let go of past hurt. And as long as everybody is fiercely protective of his ethnic group instead of fighting for national unity (2005, p. 31).

He further elaborates how ethnic sentiments have caused greater war and bloodshed in different parts of the world. Hear him:

Is it not the same thing? We complain about apartheid in South Africa, racism in North America, antisemitism in Europe, yet we condone tribalism in our land. Soon this country will be worse than Sudan, or even Israel and Arab. (2005, p. 35).

While opposing the idea to marry a second wife, he says that “mother, customs and values change from time to time. I will not divorce my wife just because we are unable to have a child” (p. 34).

Adesua Osakue: She is the mother to Ehimare

Osakue and mother-in-law to Aisha Osakue. Adesua is the antagonist of the play. This is evident as she hates Aisha due to the fact that she is from the northern part of Nigeria. While insisting that the massive killing of southerners by the northerners during the war are reasons Aisha cannot be forgiven as a northerner. To this end, Adesua persuades Ehimare to take a second wife or divorce Aisha. She further insists that her childlessness is due to the fact she is a stranger and the spirit of their ancestors is against her.

Despite her dislike to the Hausa people, Adesua Osakue is a loving mother who only wants the good for her son. Ironically, she approaches her views negatively. Adesua Osakue represents a typical African mother who is desirous to get grandchildren; most importantly from an only son. She tells Aisha thus:

And you cannot succeed. My son will have children like his father and forefathers. All strong and healthy men! Like a farmer, once they bend down to work, the earth is swollen with yam tubers. If anyone is sick, it is you (p. 20).

Otibho: She is the daughter of Adesua and sister to Ehimare. Unlike her mother, Otibho is a nice person as she genuinely loves Aisha and always encourages and supports her through her struggles and stress. Otibho is married with kids. Otibho is a kind character as she stands for what is right and just. She believes that Aisha is badly treated by her mother and therefore encourages her to be hopeful. While frowning at Ehimare’s infantile behaviour, she says “I have often warned her against tribal sentiments. Now you’ve allowed her to fold you under her influence, reduce you to the level of an animal, acting impulsively.” (p. 46)

Ruddy: She is a Yoruba girl who works for Mr. and Mrs. Ehimare Osakue as a housemaid. She nicknamed herself Ruddy because people always complained of her rude character. Ruddy always supports her madam whenever she is being bullied by her mother-in-law. Ruddy is also being loved by Chike the

driver but pretends not to be interested in Chike's love adventure. Ruddy is a strong-willed character who speaks out against injustice.

Chike: He is Ehimare's family driver from Igbo. Chike is in love with Ruddy. He is a nice and open minded person full of respect for his employers.

Analysis of Ethnic Stereotyping and Violence in *Aisha*

The predominant ethnic stereotype and violence in *Aisha* is as a result of the issue of ethnicity and culture. In the play, there is this pre-conceived idea about the Northern people by Adesua Osakue, the mother of Ehimare Osakue. She claims that the northerners are bad people as a result of killing her ancestors during the war. This is why Ehimare's mother says that marrying Aisha because of her ethnicity was tantamount to defying their traditions, thereby leading to Aisha's childlessness after about 10 years in marriage. She tells Ehimare thus: "they have turned their back on you because you have defied our traditions by marrying a stranger into our family." Notwithstanding the kind nature of Aisha and the love she has for Ehimare, Osakue insists that her son will not marry her because of the hatred she has for her people for killing southerners during the Nigerian civil war in 1967 and the continuous killing and bombing in the North. However, she is aware that Aisha lived all her life in Lagos and has nothing to do with the bombing and killing of southerners but continues to stereotype her. Ehimare informs his mother thus:

Is it only North? What about the community violence in the south? The Ogbakiri people of Rivers State have been fighting each other for years. Riots and war will continue to burst out in this country as long as the people refuse to listen to each other. As long as we cannot let go of past hurt. And as long as everybody is fiercely protective of his ethnic group instead of fighting for national unity (p. 31)

The position of Aisha Osakue is that if marriage is not done traditionally with the blessings of the ancestors, it cannot be adjudged to be genuine. It is further noticed that the hatred against Aisha is to protect the southern ethnicity.

Conclusion

The paper interrogated issues that concern ethnic stereotype, gender relations, themes and characterisation in Julie Okoh's *Aisha*. In contemporary Nigerian society, ethnic stereotype as dramatised in *Aisha* has constituted a problem in marital relationships and other socio-cultural engagements. The playwright's social vision is to investigate the factors that contribute to inefficiency in gender relation and ethnic stereotype in the Nigerian nation in particular and Africa in general. It is observed that patriarchal and cultural biases and other social stigma are ready factors that lead to ethnic stereotype. However, in the course of this analysis, themes and characterisation were used as vehicles that communicate ethnic sentiment, gender inequality and other sundry issues that were discussed and dramatised in the play, *Aisha*. The paper therefore concludes that issues relating to ethnic stereotype and obnoxious patriarchal ideology reduced effective and genuine love and committed marriage affections amongst ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Having critically analysed issues surrounding ethnic stereotype, gender relations, themes and characterisation in Julie Okoh's *Aisha*, the paper puts forward the following recommendations thus:

- ❖ It is the modest recommendation of this paper that plays such as *Aisha* should be incorporated into university and secondary school curricula in the areas of theatre and film studies and African cultural studies. This effort facilitates critical engagement with the themes of patriarchy, ethnic stereotype and gender inequality. This will

foster critical thinking and socio-cultural enlightenment in society.

- ❖ The paper further recommends that theatre practitioners and other advocacy institutions should be encouraged to adapt *Aisha* and other feminist plays as tools for community performance theatre. This will go a long way in creating awareness on gender equality and intercultural tolerance amongst other factors that enhance social cohesion.
- ❖ The paper encourages scholars to, as a matter of fact, pursue research that factors in dramatic texts; especially those in the areas of sociology and anthropology. This will help to expand understanding of the social, cultural, gender inequality and marital dynamics amongst others.
- ❖ Ethnic stereotype and gender biases should be discouraged amongst the ethnic groups in Nigeria. Therefore, people should be free to marry whom they love and cherished no matter the ethnic backgrounds.
- ❖ Childlessness should not be taken as a barrier in determining the success in marital life of couples. Males and females should be equally involved in looking for

the fruit of the womb without apportioning blame to one gender; especially the woman.

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