Reaching the Unreached Women through Open and Distance Education: Implications for the Playwright.

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ABSTRACT
Open and Distance Education is designed basically to provide accessible and affordable education to all especially those who were denied education earlier in life. Women and girls are mostly affected as evident in UNICEF’s declaration that in Africa, among children not attending school, there are twice as many girls as boys, and among illiterate adults, there are twice as many women as men. In most cultures in Nigeria, the girl-child is denied the opportunity for higher education because of early marriage or because the finances are lean so the male-child is given preference in educational considerations. The Open and Distance Learning provides opportunity for these women to acquire education but unfortunately, many of them are not aware of this golden opportunity. There is therefore a need to reach to as many of them as possible through enlightenment and mobilization programmes. So this study proposes the use of drama as a tool for the sensitization and mobilization of women on the importance education and the availability of a convenient medium for it.

INTRODUCTION
Girls and women are important target groups in developmental programmes in any nation and education enhances their empowerment prospects and consequent contribution to national development. The Cairo and Beijing conferences held in 1994 and 1995 respectively affirmed that education is one of the most important tools for women empowerment. Unfortunately, in Nigeria as in some other cultures, many women are denied access to education because of cultural considerations like early marriage or the fact that a woman is expected to marry and leave her father’s house. The resource spent to train a girl-child is therefore seen as wastage since she is seen as belonging to her husband in the long run. Hence, girls are seen as properties owned first by their fathers and later by their husbands could be sold by her father to the highest bidder. The decision to ‘sell’ may be just to fulfil the cultural obligation that stipulates that a girl must be married or if he is in dire need of money for family or social commitment. However, her husband cannot re-sell her but she is practically enslaved to him since he ‘bought’ her with his money. This society, gives the man an opportunity to fulfil and actualize himself while the woman is content to remain in the hearth as a daughter, wife and mother. Playwrights have portrayed this in their plays from different perspectives.
Fortunately, the trend is changing, parents are realising the importance of education and many women are excelling in different spheres of human endeavour and are challenging the aspects of the patriarchal system that tends to subjugate and silence women. These changes and the importance of education for the girl-child have also been reflected by playwrights from different perspectives. The non-education of the girl-child is therefore fast becoming a historical discourse but women are still being denied access to education because of religious inclinations as obtained in some Islamic families. There is also a group of women who were denied education opportunity early in life but who still yearn for education but could not go back to formal classroom because of their ages and lack of time. They are not aware of the existence of the flexible and convenient mode of education offered by the National Open University of Nigeria. Apart from these women who can move freely to register and study in there is yet another group of women who are in confinement because of their religious beliefs. They are Muslim women in purdah who are forced to live in seclusion and cover their faces. These groups of women need to be reached and drama being a vital tool for social mobilisation is recommended for use in a campaign to reach these women who ordinarily would not have been reached.

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

There is no doubt that education is a vital tool in national development. Unfortunately, not everyone has access to education due the following reasons: financial incapacitation; women on account of their gender; inadequate space in the existing conventional universities; and exigencies of the peoples’ state of lives like prisoners, nomadic farmers, and women in Purdah. It is for sake of these groups of people and others that the Federal Government of Nigeria decided to improve and increase access to higher education by establishing the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN) in realization of the its dream articulated in the National Policy on Education 1977 which states among other things that “maximum efforts will be made to enable those who can benefit from higher education to be given access to it...through universities, or correspondence courses, or open universities, or part-time and work-study programme”. NOUN offers education programmes in almost all disciplines and professions, hence, apart from the conventional courses and discipline obtainable in the conventional universities, the Centre for Life Long Learning offers short term courses in an effort to train and retrain various professionals and
artisans. Education in the university is therefore for all and for life-long sustenance. Unfortunately, those who need that education, especially women, are not aware of the existence of NOUN and its programmes. On its part, NOUN is aware of the ignorance of many people of its programmes so, places much emphasis on advocacy to widen access for all.

DRAMA AND SOCIETY

The playwright is a member of the society and his product, drama, is created from and exists in the society. Drama, therefore, mirrors the society and is utilized by the audience who are themselves, members of the society. Invariably, there exists a relationship between the playwright and the society which highlights his/her relevance to that society. Wole Soyinka predicates this relevance on how acutely the playwright mirrors the reality of his society and points the way forward to higher ideals and more humane alternatives.

Drama becomes a vital platform for the explication of social realities to expose those ills and their perpetrators. Thus drama becomes a forum for combating oppressive forces in the society with the aim of initiating solutions for a better society. Issues of social concerns are therefore explored copiously and highlighted in drama for the information, education and edification of the people.

The artist has a role to play in the society as he has been variously described as a guide, a teacher, the conscience of the society, a visionary, a moral barometer, and a transformer. Chinua Achebe (2012) believes that the writer is “the sensitive point in his community”. He is expected to “march right in front” in “the task of re-education and re-generation that must be done” (45). In the same vein, Romanus Egudu (1998) insists the artist “dissects the society not only at its political level but also at its moral level” because he/she is “…an important guardian of social justice, a barometer of our moral climate and a disciple of truth” (63). Olu Obafemi specifically sees the role of the dramatist in “the employment of the theatre to effect social change” (169). Femi Osofisan declares that “…theatre must be very instructive” (Awodiya _Excursions_ 24) and that his task as a playwright is to use “…his writing to contribute to the changing of our society” (Awodiya _Excursions_ 86). Emeka Nwabueze (2005) amplifies these views:

the playwright is many things at once: a philosopher, a
historical witness, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, a
teacher, a custodian of the moral conscience of his society.

He should ...see his work as an enterprise that has
tremendous utility, which should be a vehicle for change (35)

Akachi Ezeigbo (2008) sums it by saying that the literary artist uses his/her work as “a veritable tool for social engineering, for creating social awareness and redirecting society and projecting society into the future” (14). Drama as a work of art impacts on the society in various ways so the dramatist cannot afford not to be relevant to his society because

Where the writer in his own society can no longer function as the conscience, he must recognize that his choice lies between denying himself totally or withdrawing to the position of a chronicler and post-mortem surgeon…the artist has always functioned in African societies as the record of mores and experiences of his society and as a voice of vision in his time (Achebe 20012: 21)

It is therefore difficult to separate drama from the society since the relevance of the playwright is orchestrated as his/her work impacts positively on the society. This explains why in 534 B.C. the Greek ruler, Pisistratus, set up dramatic contests as part of the festival of Dionysius thus making drama a state affair. Since then, drama has influenced societies in different ways and it was possible for “Shakespeare or Ibsen to communicate a state of mind, for Moliere or Shaw to examine a social situation, for Goethe or Sartre to expound a philosophy, for Aeschylus or Eliot to demonstrate a religion…” (Styan 1979:64).

The important role of the playwright in the society is therefore not in question.

**Portrayal of Women in Plays**

African playwrights have addressed the issue of marginalisation of the girl-child which led to their denial of access to education by parents. Each playwright captures these realities of the African world-view and presents them from his/her perspective. For instance, in J.P. Clark’s *The Masquerade*,(1996) the woman is seen as an object to be sold and bought. She is described as “a cow or a calabash, all placid, beautiful and smooth(in which one) can hardly rule out roughness within or...(which) can escape rattle when shaken”(5). She must be sold to the highest bidder to meet certain financial obligations like in Efua
Sutherland’s *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) where Ananse decides to marry off his daughter to the richest chief and in exasperation Anansewa cries out: “Who said I wanted to marry a chief eh?... Oh! My father is selling me...like some parcel to a customer” (10-11). In the case of Ogwuma in Zulu Sofola’s *Wedlock of the Gods*, (1972) she is forced to marry the rich Adigwu instead of Uloku whom she loves, because her father needs the money from her bride price desperately. She complains but her best friend reprimands her: “Ogwuma, our people say that a man’s daughter is a source of wealth to him. Your parents needed the money for a very expensive sacrifice for your brother whom sickness almost killed. You should have been happy that your money saved the life of your brother” (9). A man who buys the woman as a commodity treats her as his property, hence *Man* in Tess Onwueme’s *The Reign of Wazobia* (1993) beats his wife for not being at home at the “appropriate time”. He contributes little or nothing to the feeding of his family yet insists that whenever he comes home, he must find his “food and woman waiting at the table”(22). The woman’s plea that she “must leave the house to fetch the food” falls on deaf ears. The king (a female regent) condemns his action but he sees it as an aberration and insists that a “mere woman that I paid with my hard earned money” cannot challenge him in his own house (24).

In most of these plays, the subservient position of the women are presented as norms so the woman who resists, pays dearly for it.

However, the trend is changing as more parents realise the import of girl-child education but there is need for those who were seen as commodities and sold off early in life to go back to school. Playwrights, especially women, are now using their works to mobilize women for positive action. Tess Onwueme, for instance, *Reign* uses Wazobia, to mobilize the village women for self assertion and self actualization. Wazobia is able to achieve this feat because of her educational background.

There is therefore a need for other playwrights to go beyond the portrayal of the marginalisation of the girl-child and present the emancipation of the woman through education. NOUN, specifically, in its advocacy for women education has included the use of drama to educate and inform the public of the need for girl-child education, the opportunity to go back to school by those who were denied access to education earlier in life because of early marriages.

This group of women form part of the target group of learners for NOUN which offers a flexible learning mode for students to study, even from their homes in realisation of section 1.4 (f) of the BLUEPRINT &
One aspect of education gap in Nigeria is the discrepancy as regards equal opportunities in education for girls and women. It is often reported that both formal and non-formal education programmes at a distance reach substantial numbers of women, including societies where women lack equal opportunities of participation in conventional forms of education and training. Efforts to tailor programmes particularly towards, women in general, women in purdah, in nomadic communities, disabled/handicapped people, etc. as target groups are bound to increase with ODL.(31)

This is stated but the truth is that majority of these women are not aware of this golden opportunity. There is therefore an urgent need for such mobilization and drama presents a very good medium for social mobilization because it brings the message realistically to the audience.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Short plays that reflect the existence of NOUN and its programmes could be presented through notable women associations that have grass-root footings especially religious organizations. It is usually easier to reach more women through such organizations. This dramatization could also be recorded and distributed via DVD, CD, radio and television stations so that women in the remotest parts of the country could be reached and that includes women in purdah and nomadic women. The plays written in English and translated in the three major languages in Nigeria and pidgin. On a larger scale, the home video which is very popular in Nigeria now could also be utilized and even the women in purdah could watch the films and be mobilized.

Already NOUN Theatre has initiated this project with the convocation play “Enough is Enough” which presented market women who resist an attempt by touts to collect illegal levies from them because one of them is an undergraduate whose educational background has provided the necessary consciousness for the protection of their fundamental human rights. They triumph and the other women resolve to go to
school too. This play could be taken to some major markets to create awareness on this golden opportunity of a second chance which women have to go back to school.

**CONCLUSION**

Education is most effective instrument for mental and social emancipation of the people so many nations try to provide equitable, accessible and quality education to most of their citizens. Unfortunately this is an uphill task considering the challenge posed to its realization because it is difficult for the government to provide access to education for all the citizens because the formal or conventional face-to-face system cannot accommodate all who are interested in education. Moreover, there are some, mainly women, who could have had opportunity to be educated but were denied access to education forcefully due to cultural or religious considerations. They need to go back to school.

Luckily, the increase in the development of information and communication technologies has affected the education process positively and has expanded educational opportunities to reach the unreached groups who might never have had access to education. These groups include women in purdah, house wives especially those denied opportunity of education due to early marriages, migrant cattle farmers, fishermen, offshore oil workers, prisoners and many other groups. It is against this backdrop that **open and distance learning** becomes an answer to equitable access to education especially providing a second chance for those who need it. Unfortunately, these women are not aware of this opportunity provided for them through ODL.

Studying through ODL is a popular option for students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds because the tuition at ODL institutions is expected to be much lower than it is at conventional contact universities but more importantly, ODL gives students the option of studying while earning a living. This is imperative especially for women who generally belong to the low socio-economic backgrounds. However, the failure of those who need it to be aware of its existence, reveals that critical areas of widening participation have not yet been addressed. Many are unlikely to utilize this opportunity since they are unaware of its existence. This paper presents a model for reaching those who yearn for education but do not have the time and resources to go back to the face-to-face-classroom setting in conventional schools.
ODL affords them the opportunity to work and learn as they could study within the confines of their homes, market, farm and other workplaces. Drama which presents action realistically to the audience could be an ideal tool for creating awareness for these women and mobilizing them.

REFERENCES


