

# SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPE AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN TESS ONWUEME'S *THE REIGN OF WAZOBIA*

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## **Abstract**

Women empowerment is a topical issue motivated by women disempowerment achieved over the years through sex-role stereotype. To be disempowered is to be alienated and marginalized. Socio economic and political factors motivate marginalization. The female folk is an important social group disempowered by sex-role differentiation practised by various ethnic groups and communities all over the world. This notion must change!

Hence, the focal point of this study is to examine how the persistent portrayal of sex-role stereotype in African literature has affected women empowerment campaign and the society, the possibility of change and the benefits its eradication will attract to women empowerment campaign. The artist as the conscience of any nation is poised to use his art to change the political status of women through portraying the effect of sex-role stereotyping on women liberation movements, political struggle and empowerment. Furthermore, Tess Onwue's attempt in *The Reign of Wazobia* to break this jinx will be used as a paradigm to propagate the emancipation of women from the maternal-companion stereotype status to the occupation of the seat of power.

## **Introduction**

Women empowerment is a topical issue motivated by women disempowerment achieved over the years through sex-role stereotype. Across the globe, women are disempowered in the various traditions and cultures of the people. To be disempowered is to be alienated and marginalized. Different factors motivate marginalization. They may be tribal factors, difference in colour, income, or conditions of birth. No matter what the motivating factor may be, it is a truism that a cross section of the society is usually involved. The female folk is an important social group in the society, disempowered by sex - role differentiation particularly by various ethnic groups and communities all over the world. The beginnings of sex role differentiation and consequent male dominance dates back to the primitive man. It was common practice then, to leave the pregnant female, heavy and tired, in the cave, while the male goes out to hunt for food and provide the much needed protection for the woman and her children. Similarly, Biblical writers portray this female subordination and dependency on the male by instructing the woman that, "thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over you".

Thus Ford, (1970:29) sums up the stereotype model of a woman produced by tradition, culture and religion, he says:

To be a woman is to be a mother. Whatever else she may do in the way of routine activities, and however else she may participate in social life, her primary function is to reproduce.

This stereotype image has come to dominate the role of women in various eras of human history, preventing her from rising beyond the status of a domestic servant, a caring mother, a loving wife or at most a charming queen. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica. (1982:560), "a stereotype is a printing plate; when a papier- rnache or similar material is molded to it; the dried mat is used as a metal cast, to cast stereotypes." Hence the features and characteristics of the stereotypes cast are known since they are already predetermined by the metal cast. Therefore no matter how many stereotypes cast, there can never be variations, changes and departure from the metal cast. Similarly prejudiced mental constructs in human beings produces 'mental plate cast' which leads to stereotyping in the society. Therefore, such generalizations like 'Women are the weaker sex' 'Women are inferior to men', 'education of a woman ends in the kitchen,' 'Politics is a man's game', 'man is the head of the family,' derive from mental plate cast. Evidently, such generalizations emanating from sex role stereotype favour man and disempowers the woman. Thus stereotypes are discriminatory collective representations rather than empirical conclusions based on individual ability. Olurode

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(1990:18) opines that, stereotypes are thus group trait and not an individualistic invention. They emanate from inner organization and earlier childhood experiences". Olurode explains further that: "these irrational factors which produce stereotypes tend to overweigh rational derivatives or behaviours arrived at via conscious efforts." Unfortunately, the traditional society, influenced by the above view, customarily assigns maternal role to the woman and gives the man a more domineering role of the bread winner and family head. Hence in most communal enclaves, the customary role of the woman is to bear children, tend the home and her children and provide assistance to the man. This traditional sex-role differentiation is stereotyped over the years to be accepted in the modern society as a customary norm. Thus no matter how gifted a woman is, no matter her ingenuity and political exploits she can only be recognized in the society as a good and caring mother. Any other ambitious image a woman portrays outside this stereotype model earns her derogatory names like iron lady, domineering lady or even the Biblical notorious name- Jezebel.

Sex-role differentiation has its advantages, however role differentiation based on sex constitutes political and socio-economic problem when it turns into stereotypes. Olurode (1990:8), maintains that:

Stereotyping may run counter to our development efforts especially when women after acquiring a rare skill are never the less barred from performing tasks which require the requisition of that skill.

Sex-role-stereotype is therefore incompatible with democratization and developmental process as well as globalization tenets. Democracy preaches equality between the sexes, while development encourages participation by both sexes. At the same time globalization motivates mutual interaction of male and female and peaceful co-existence of both sexes around the globe. Contrarily, sex-role stereotype stands opposed to these contemporary and globally accepted norms requisite for the upliftment of mankind. Sex-role stereotype subjugates the woman and places her at a subordinate position in the strata of most communal enclaves thereby retarding human progress. The need to change the predicament of women is now paramount in our nation where men have failed the country in their leadership position. Thus, women and youth development programmes should top the priorities of government and human resources development agencies in the country.

Hence Uchendu (1993:64) opines that:

Men cannot claim exclusive right to shape the future of our world. It is time for them to accept the challenge and share with women in decision-making process. It is high time to acknowledge that the denial of women's rights and opportunities is at the root of our developmental problems and social economic ills... The most underdeveloped of all human resources are women.

Hence, the focal point of this study is to examine how the persistent portrayal of sex- role stereotype in African literature, has affected women empowerment .and the society, the possibility of change and the benefits its eradication will attract to women empowerment campaign. The artist as the conscience of any nation is poised to use his art to change the political status of women through portraying the effect of sex-role stereotyping on women liberation movements, political struggle and empowerment. Furthermore, Tess Onwueme's attempt in *The Reign of Wazobia* to break this jinx will be used as a paradigm to propagate the emancipation of women from the maternal-companion stereotype status to the occupation of the seat of power.

### **Women as a Disempowered Group**

Women empowerment cannot be achieved without first of all identifying women as a disempowered group. Identification of sources and areas of women disempowerment will also help in dismantling agents of sex-role stereotype and consequent women disempowerment. Sexism is as old as the human race, older than American racism and South African apartheid. Human race manifests in every communal enclave, cultural practices, traditions, folklore, and myths subjugating the women folk; thus making them powerless in the society. Therefore, women disempowerment emanates from religious, biological and cultural factors inherent in the fabrics of the society. Hence Uchendu (1993:8) opines that:

The dependent relationship of woman was in the past as much taken for granted as in our day is that of the child: Law defined it, social traditions solidified it and educational partiality perpetuated it.

Therefore, no matter from what angle you look at it, women are subjugated under sex-role stereotype, while men are favoured. For instance, it is common practice in our tradition that women cannot be recognized as heads of family. Such positions are the exclusive rights of men. They enjoy such rights with its attendant material and political advantages. Moreover, our customary law also recognizes men only, as family head. Customarily therefore, the man is said to own family land and other household income generating resources. He is entitled by the virtue of his position as family head, to perform other socio-political functions, which the woman cannot perform. Even in modern judicial process the family head who is a man, is the only person qualified under customary law to take legal action concerning any family land or property. In fact our criminal code, recognizes only a 'he' as family head. It is obvious to conclude at this point that, factors motivating women disempowerment bifurcates into cultural and economic factors.

However, the dynamisms of change, democratization process and globalization demand that the role of women must change. Musa (1992:55) opines that:

There is a general realization now that the advancement of women in general must be squarely addressed because women, for instance, particularly in Africa constitute a significant percentage of the total population and have been making tremendous contributions in all sectors of the economy.

Furthermore, Musa declares, "it's very clear therefore, that if any sustained and meaningful development is to be achieved, the question of women in politics for nation building must be squarely addressed."

### **Women Liberation and Political Empowerment**

Politics is the struggle to gain control over the machinery that sees to the organizational well being of the people. The gladiatorial contest attribute of politics seem to have made it a man's game. Man, the senior prefect of every geo-political enclave is daring, bold, brave and domineering, therefore he dominates the political arena, subjugating the woman to play a subordinate role in the political activities of most nations. This is without prejudice to the impact made by women in politics and governance across the globe. However, man since the emergence of the society has remained more conscious and daring in the global political arena. Thus, male dominance and women powerlessness triggered off frantic women liberation movements that culminated in feminism in the middle ages and women empowerment in the contemporary democratic society.

Change is a major contributor to the sustenance of human existence. The society is always under the influence of the dynamisms of change motivated by socio-political and economic factors. The Nigerian society for instance moved from traditional governance to colonialism, from colonialism to independence, to military dictatorship and back to democratic rule. There is no gainsaying that these political transitions affect women's role and level of participation in politics. According to Okwuosa (1992:6); "The tandem-like relationship between political participation and the exercise of political power is clearly borne out in all definitions of the former so far provided by political scientists..." Lawson and Wasburn (1969:XI), defining political participation says:

- Political participation is the process by which individuals acting singly or through group organization attempt to influence decision-making or alter the manner in which power may be distributed and the principles by which it may be exercised in a particular society.

Hence, political empowerment is the product of political participation. Therefore, if women are powerless, it then means that they are not active participants in the political process of the nation. Though, women have achieved reasonable level of participation in the recent past, but does this level of political participation give them access to the corridor of power? It does not, because different levels of participation leads to different levels of power acquisition in politics. For instance, early feminist struggle won for women the right to vote during elections. According to the Encyclopedia

Britannica (1981:731) Vol X, women by 1893, have won the right to vote in local elections in Australia. Between 1906 and 1913 such rights were won in Finland, Sweden and the United States. However, the United Nations' convention on "the political rights of women" adopted in 1952 provided for women political equality with men in all the states and nations of the world. Since then women participation in politics has been without restriction or impairing legislations. Most states as a matter of policy encourage women enlightenment campaigns and political awareness programmes to boost women empowerment.

Thus women became more conscious to acquire political power and become fully empowered. To achieve this goal more women organizations working for the mobilization and empowerment of women have emerged, some of them are: The National Council of Women Societies (NCWS), The Federation of Muslim Women Association (FOMWA) and Women in Nigeria (WIN). These societies encourage women to participate and compete with men in politics and governance. Expressing this new zeal, Spila (1975:1) says:

**Men cannot claim an exclusive right to shape the future of our world. It is high time for them to accept challenge and share with women in decisionmaking process. It is high time to acknowledge that the denial of women's rights and opportunities is at the root of our development problems.**

Evidently, women have made remarkable progress in politics. Women enjoy the same constitutional and political rights with men, women can vote or be voted for during the electoral process, they belong to political parties and attend rallies, they also give political talks and organize enlightenment programmes. Then, why must women remain in a state of political powerlessness? The simple answer is that; the agencies of women empowerment including female writers, artists, government and Non-governmental organizations are yet to lift the role of women above the female stereotype role. Okwuosa (1992:15) maintains that:

**The force of role-stereotyping of women on the basis of their natural function alone by Nigerian society (men and women inclusive), is strong, that even where women transcend the barriers and successfully capture political positions, they are often expected to carry the traditional image along with them into the new functions, in order to succeed. Hence in Nigeria, women legislators or party executive members are expected to portray nothing other than the motherly' figure. They are not assessed as good legislators or good party administrators but as "mother of the Constituent Assembly" or mother of the party.**

Hence, for the women folk to be fully empowered, agencies and proponents of women empowerment, especially the African playwright must lift the political role of women above the female role stereotype model.

### **Sex-Role Stereotype and Women Empowerment in *The Reign of Wazobia***

Literature, in its oral and written forms, remains consistently a strong tool in the representation of contemporary realities of our time. Since the breakthrough of Cyprian Ekwensi in *People of the City* and Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. African writers portray the changing role of women in our society. They portray in their literary works, the role of women during different eras of our chequered political history. Hence their literary works reflect the role of women during precolonial era, colonial era, independent, and post independent era. However, the African writer is still faced with the enormous task of emancipating and empowering the women. To achieve this feat, the African writer must break the jinx of sex-role, stereotyping of women on the basis of their natural functions. The works of early writers like Chinua Achebe and Elechi Amadi portray the status and role of women during the colonial and pre-colonial era as restricted to the domestic arena without much participation in the political process of the community.

The changing role of women is reflected in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Adora Ulasi's *Many Things Begin* for change. These writers reveal in their works active involvement of women in their communities after independence. The impact made by women is strongly felt in areas of trading, farming and social interactions. Despite relative progress ipade, activities of women are still limited to domestic activities, petty trading and child bearing. In po§| independent plays like *Our Husband Has*

*Gone Mad Again* by Ola Rotimi, women became involved in political mobilization, enlightenment campaign and party politics. Sikira, wife of Lejoka Brown, nominated by the National Libertarian Party in her address to the women says “Rise up! All women of our land! Rise up and vote for freedom, or forever be slaves.” P.76. Fred Agbeyegebe in *The King Must Dance Naked*, presents to us the scheming of Queen Odosun who out of sheer struggle paved way for her daughter Omajuwa to become king. However, Agbeyegebe presents Omajuwa’s reign as an abomination. According to the narrator in the play, “No woman, however beautiful, however resourceful was allowed to rule”. P.3-4. Thus the playwright presents Omajuwa’s reign as a crises ridden period. He eventually succumbed to female stereotyping when king Omajuwa’s womanhood was exposed. Accepting her fate Omajuwa says, “son, you are a man now. Rule if you can.” P.62. Omajuwa accepted her fate, she bowed to the superior political scheming of men, led by her own son. Thus her down fall corroborates the woman stereotype notion that women are not competent to occupy the seat of power.

This sexist notion is discriminatory and retrogressive. Therefore, a change is desired to give women access to the pinnacle of power, especially in the present political dispensation where the male folk have failed the nation. Onwueme reflects this view in *The Reign of Wazobia* which is a portrayal of a radical departure from the female role stereotype notion as well as the consistent but relative progress made by women in political participation and governance. Hence, women empowerment as advocated by the researcher and portrayed in *The Reign of Wazobia* is further legitimated by the prevalent global democratization principles of equality of citizens and fundamental rights of individuals irrespective of sex, colour and age. Onwueme’s thematic fixation in the play therefore centres on extension of the principles of democracy to all groups and individuals of the nation through greater and meaningful participation in the political process. This is the philosophical motivation and practical justification of women empowerment. Influenced by this philosophy, Onwueme in *The Reign of Wazobia* vehemently condemns female role stereotyping. She portrays from the radical point of view the implications of power acquisition and the attendant socio-political and economic benefits to the ruling group. Thus she goes all out to break the jinx of female role stereotyping. She portrays women as capable of competing, fighting and struggling for political power with men. She reveals in the play superior female mobilization ability and determination needed by the women to reach the pinnacle of power. Hence Onwueme justifies the view that women can only achieve full empowerment if they rise above sex-role stereotype, because “politics in democratic studies is about conflict and struggle for rights” (Ayoade, 1992:2).

The secret of Onwueme’s success in *The Reign of Wazobia* is her proficiency in theoretical analysis and characterization. Through her analytical prowess she deduced that female role stereotyping has been the bane of women empowerment. Thus in her characterization she modeled a strong willed female protagonist; bestowed with the responsibility of championing the course of the women folk, Wazobia, the protagonist accomplished her mission, shunning the traditional role of male companionship, child bearing and motherhood, Wazobia, mobilized the women, fought the men and became king in Anioma kingdom. Onwueme purposely modeled her protagonist to fit into the carefully created redemption role, thus she did not allow Wazobia to know male “defilement” in form of marriage or motherhood. According to Onwueme, Wazobia was chosen from the dancing maidens, who are daughters of Ilaaa, in Anioma kingdom. Wazobia becomes a regent and later rises to the position of a king without subjecting herself to marriage, child bearing and male companionship. Wazobia was pre-occupied with the accomplishment of her mission to wrestle out power from the male folk and change the status of women.

Wazobia displays a remarkable astuteness in mobilization and governance while she was regent. Having thus tasted power, she decides to usurp the throne and empower women. Wazobia’s women empowerment drive, her campaign strategy and mobilization ability reveals her determination to cling to power and lift women to the peak of political leadership in Ilaaa land. Wazobia displays the requisite prowess for empowering the women, in one of her sensitizing speeches she says to the woman:

For ages you have been dancing to  
feast the eyes of licentious men  
and visiting generals.  
Dance no more! What good has the gyration  
brought you?

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Dance no more!  
For ages they have used  
and sucked you dry and dispose off  
At will, when will you learn P.6.

As a regent, Wazobia made some impact on the lives of the people this dialogue between her and the Drummer testifies to that:

Drummer:

**Wazobia, whose hands mend the tattered sinews of our world!**

Wazobia:

**Inflicted for ages by your men who ruled.. .misruled us leaving the world in tatters. P.5.**

Onwueme did not fail to emphasize the importance of collective will to the struggle. She shows that the women must be united in order to succeed, hence Wazobia reaches out to the Omu (the women leader). Even though, the Omu was initially supporting the men, Wazobia succeeds in winning her support at last, and she encourages all the women to support Wazobia, she pleads:

**This is why you must stand behind Wazobia  
your king, with your bosom that men will not  
penetrate p. 52.**

Having received this collective and over whelming backing from women, Wazobia rolls out her socio-political reforms that changed the status of women and achieves political empowerment for the group. Wazobia insists that men must kneel in greeting before women leaders. She authoritatively shouts at one of llaaa men-lyase to kneel before her.

Wazobia:

**(Authoritatively) you will kneel lyase (Vehemently): kneel, lyase! P.12.**

On matters of the state, political equality and political participation for women and children, Wazobia says:

**I do not see any reason why women and youths must be kept away from matters of state concern. P.27.**

Therefore, she advocates that women and youths must be part of the political process. Wazobia also used her office as king to change repressive cultural practices against the women in Anioma kingdom. She attacks harsh and discriminatory mourning rituals against the women to alleviate the suffering of widows, she maintains:

Wazobia:

**Why, may I ask must widows be subjected to the torment of incessant funeral rites that men are free of under similar situations, Omu? P.21**

On nudity she re-affirms:

Wazobia:

**(Arrogantly): I see, Omu, my women will not dance naked in public to appease the eyes of a wrathful populace. This is no era for dancing to entertain lustful eyes. P.21.**

Finally, Wazobia highlights how the previous government headed by men misruled the people and failed the community, addressing the people of llaaa she says:

Wazobia:

**Daughters and sons of llaaa! For centuries men have ruled... For centuries men have ruled... misruled us. P.30.**

Therefore, she concludes that women have taken over leadership of the community from men. Supporting her Bia, one of the women says:

Bia:

We have taken over the stage women have taken over the stage.

Obviously, women successfully took over the leadership of the community from the men. The playwright goes beyond the female role stereotype model to portray Wazobia as a capable leader, an astute politician and a wonderful military tactician. Wazobia successfully mobilized the women to carry out collective struggle for women empowerment. She planned and executed the war in which the women defeated the men in a fierce battle that left men scattered and confused. Acknowledging the devastated situation of the men, Iyase says to Idehen: Iyase:

Get the pieces of yourself together man.  
or has Wazobia so shattered you that  
she has crushed the balls between your  
thighs?  
Has Wazobia empowered herself with  
your manhood? P.38.

Finally, Idehen responds, lamenting the obvious defeat of the men and the reign of Wazobia, he laments:

Idehen:

How? With vvhhat mouth will it be said  
that we sons of llaaa, lost our manhood  
with a sweep of a woman's hand? P.  
56.

From the playwright's point of view, men failed in their leadership of the community. However, Onwueme shows that women should rise above the sex-role stereotype model and come together to fight for their empowerment, men will not hand over power to women on a platter of gold.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that sex-role stereotyping started with the human race. In most communal enclaves of the world therefore, tradition, cultural practices and religion support and sustain sex-role stereotyping.

Hence, consciously or unconsciously, even artists and playwrights imbibe this, sex-role differentiation practices and portray them in their literary works.

Consequently, it has been erroneously accepted that women are created as helpers to men. They are therefore saddled with the responsibility of motherhood, domestic labour and companionship. They are subordinates and therefore are not accepted in the nations' political arena. Women are seen as incapable of competing with men in politics and occupying the seat of power. Thus they do better as mothers and nurses. This stereotype model remain the bane of women political empowerment. Women cannot go beyond their present level of political participation if this jinx is not broken.

Onwueme has broken this jinx in her play, *The Reign of Wazobia*. She brings to us that women can compete with men, defeat them in battles and occupy the pinnacle of political power.

Without doubt women have made some impact in the political arena of the nation, but there are different levels of political participation. For the women to be fully empowered, they must organize themselves as a distinct social group, relevant in the political process of the nation.

Women must increase their economic base through embarking on income generating programmes, especially in the rural areas, predominantly inhabited by women. This is important because economic power leads to political power. Women must seek elective positions, they must aim to occupy high political offices /like the office of the *president, senate president, speaker of the house of representatives, e.t.c.*

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The researcher therefore agrees with Onwueme that the women must live above the female stereotype model and adopt the radical liberation approach so as to achieve full political empowerment in Nigeria.

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