

A CRY FOR DEMOCRACY: THE DARK REALITY OF ETHNIC BELLIGERENCE AND HYSTERIC VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Julie Okoh's play A Cry for Democracy is a poignant examination of Nigeria's tumultuous history of ethnic conflict and violence. Set against the country's colonial legacy and its post-colonial struggles, the play articulates a narrative that exposes the destructive impact of oppressive political systems on the Nigerian populace. Through a tripartite structure, Okoh illuminates the complexities of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Nigeria, drawing upon Frantz Fanon's theories of oppression to analyze the internalized violence and self-loathing perpetuated by colonial rule. This research explores the concept of democratic womanism articulated by Alice Walker and how it frames the struggle for social justice in a nation reeling from years of exploitation. By connecting the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria with the brutal realities imposed by both colonizers and contemporary leaders, the play calls for a radical rethinking of leadership and community solidarity. Looking ahead, the study advocates for further exploration of womanism as a transformative movement that can empower Nigerian women and forge a path toward genuine democracy. It underscores the need for continued dialogue on the intersections of gender, politics, and post-colonial identity. It suggests that a collective awakening among women may be key to reshaping Nigeria's future.

Keywords: Ethnic conflict, Political oppression, Colonial Legacy,

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Democratic Womanism, Leadership, Gender politics.

INTRODUCTION:

The legacy of colonization is intricate and deeply embedded in global history. For centuries, the exploitative nature of colonization drove imperial powers to seize the wealth and valuable resources of other nations as their own. This practice inflicted profound and often irreparable harm worldwide, resulting in the loss of material riches and in countless lives, identities, cultural roots, freedoms, and the fundamental right to live unshackled. Various motives propelled ambitious colonizers. Emerging capitalist economies sought economic gain, targeting valuable resources like gold, silver, and petroleum as raw materials. Others pursued strategic territorial expansion to dominate trade routes and enhance their military and geopolitical influence. Some even justified their actions under the guise of scientific exploration, claiming they sought to discover new lands, resources, and knowledge for humanity's advancement. The consequences of colonization left enduring scars on native populations, impacting them politically, economically, socially, and culturally.

*Nigeria is one such instance of wounded territories that bled and kept on bleeding for more than fifty years after the exclusion of its colonial invaders. It inflicts indelible scars on Nigerians, a nation rich in culture and potential, yet systematically weakened and fractured by foreign powers seeking dominance. The colonial period, marked by exploitation and oppression, implanted deep-seated wounds that have yet to heal fully, persisting into the present day as internal struggles take the place of former external chains. Julie Okoh's play *A Cry for Democracy* is based on the realistic political conditions of Nigeria's history of barbarism. Okoh, displaying remarkable courage, exposes the West's deceptive civility, leading to enduring human and material losses. Her words voice those billion unheard Nigerians who have been undergoing the trail of callousness for centuries.*

*In *Cry for Democracy*, the call for democratic womanism reflects a critique of traditional political systems and an appeal for a more inclusive and equitable framework that prioritizes the well-being of all members of society. Democratic womanism, as conceptualized by scholars like Alice Walker, emphasizes inclusivity, compassion, and cooperation while addressing the interconnected struggles of political disenfranchisement, gender inequality, and societal injustice. Democratic womanism emphasizes the importance of women as leaders and agents of change, not only in their families but also in the broader*

political and social context. In the play, Okoh highlights the resilience and strength of women as she calls for their increased participation in governance and decision-making. This empowerment is essential to addressing systemic inequalities and fostering a more compassionate and balanced society. Okoh's call for democratic womanism in the play suggests that democracy in its current form is insufficient for addressing the complex needs of Nigerian society. She proposes a reimagined democracy that incorporates the values of inclusivity, empathy, and cooperation—key tenets of democratic womanism—to create a system that works for all, not just the elite few.

The writer unleashes the facts from the three strands of Nigeria's history through her power-pack play *Cry for Democracy*. It asserts that the post-colonial era emerged with vices of its own and gave birth to ethnic hostility and masochism from which the writer of the said play urges all Nigerians to emerge. This research covers Nigerian history's pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial aspects, as delineated by Julie in the play; in the light of Frantz Fanon's views about oppressor and oppressed. I would also illuminate the term, democratic womanism, the democracy needed by the rule of women is necessitated to get the oppression-free state introduced to black women by Alice Walker; and how the writer contemplates the Renaissance through this.

The play opens with Okoh's confession of her proud nationalism and her glorious past. Nigerians, the drops of the sun, had a glorious history of their legends and heroes. Although the people lived in rustic and undeveloped conditions, 'human feelings' were their prized assets, where money did not creep in to be weighed against the relationships and people possessed high moral values and guidance of their ancestors.

The pre-colonial era in Nigeria was a time of profound spiritual and cultural depth, where societal harmony was maintained through a deep reverence for deities and a belief in the purifying power of confession. When individuals erred, they sought forgiveness through rituals and confessions, which allowed for a renewal of the soul and restored balance within the community. The only true fear among the people was that of supernatural forces, both respected and feared as guardians of moral order. This era fostered a way of life anchored in tradition, respect for the unseen, and a commitment to communal integrity. Unlike the eras that followed, the terror that touched their lives was mystical rather than political, external rather than internal—a stark contrast to the societal upheavals that would later define the colonial and post-colonial periods. The happiness of their glorious past was however shattered by

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British intervention.

On April 1, 1600, a tragic chapter began for the African continent when British sailors arrived on the shores of Nigeria, a land rich in natural beauty and resources. This marked the start of a brutal invasion targeting the very existence of African communities. Many were captured, shackled, and enslaved, forced to serve under inhumane conditions. It is estimated that more than 10 million Africans were enslaved, with countless others losing their lives in the process. The British colonizers, with the plea of abolishing the slave trade from Nigeria, stepped into its territories: enriched with natural resources. By 1850, they established around Lagos and consolidated their rule, by governing through local people. The so-called ‘Mission Civilisatrice’ of the colonizers claimed countless lives, and those who survived were left in a state of living death, stripped of dignity and pride through relentless dehumanization. What was initially presented as a humanitarian mission quickly transformed into a campaign of looting and exploitation, robbing Nigeria of its wealth and heritage? Frantz Fanon insightfully exposes this hypocrisy of the West, highlighting the dark irony behind its self-proclaimed civilizing intentions.

“Colonialism hardly ever exploits the whole of a country. It contends itself with bringing to light the natural resources, which it extracts, and exports to meet the needs of the mother country's industries, thereby allowing certain sectors of the colony to become relatively rich. But the rest of the colony follows its path of under-development and poverty, or at all events sinks into it more deeply” (Fanon 159).

Everything produced in the world is seen as the rightful inheritance of the white community, as if by destiny. They perceive themselves as divinely appointed to possess, claim, and civilize all whom they view as uncivilized, untamed, wild, and a ‘free-born’ across the globe. Their invasion of Nigeria was met by resistance but they, through their powerful discourse, asserted their authority over the natives as Okoh says, “White teachers told me stories about their countries and ancestors” (11), their particular way to abolish the history of natives by replacing their own to uproot their cultural values.

Whiteman’s invasion begins with reducing the minds of the colonized to the state of ‘tabula rasa’—blank slates where they inscribe their own commands (Fanon 33).

To tell the truth, the proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up. The extraordinary importance of this change is that it is willed, called for, demanded. The need for this change exists in its crude state, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness and in the -35- lives of the men and women who are colonized. But the possibility of this change is equally experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the consciousness of another "species" of men and women: the colonizers (Fanon 36).

Their first strategic move is to create self-loathing among the natives; to either make them forgetful of their past whatsoever and feel disgusted about their cultural, social, and religious belongings. Nigeria, mostly consisting of Muslims, was to the British, the land of infidels whom they wanted to convert to Christianity: the religion of the 'Superior', which is inclusive of their civilizing mission. Having replaced their religious beliefs and converting many unwilling to embrace Christianity, they next worked to replace the natives' history with theirs. Every colonial oppressor around the globe has practiced making the colonized believe that their previous way of life was one of "Darkness," and that only now would the whites bring them true "Enlightenment." Fanon pertinently explained, "History, both history of the West and history as perceived by the West is transformed into a mighty river into which all other histories flow and merge as mere minor and irrelevant tributaries" (iv).

The Colonial superiority of whites eliminated all cultural, social, political, and religious values which Nigerians once treasured, "The Negro enslaved by his inferiority; the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behaves in accordance with a neurotic orientation" (Fanon iix). Their past, their history, their knowledge, hence everything is effaced and replaced. The Whiteman overpowers their lives and carries the massacre of unruly rebels to the point of genocide and servitude to the state of mindlessness (Fanon ii). The children of the colonized, from their very birth witness violence and are traumatized from the early stages. Such a generation keeps on suppressing their fury against their oppressors like suppressed lava but no revolt takes place for "the native has but one choice: servitude and sovereignty" (Fanon xivi) or else their lives pay for their perpetuated resistance.

According to the writer Julie Okoh, Whites fled away from Nigeria when everyone in the union asserted their volcanic fury against them. Nigeria was decolonized in 1960 and people were exhilarated but in the words of Fanon, they were only emancipated, and not liberated. Consequently, Nigerian's suffering got worse with time. The leaders were part of Nigeria's bourgeois

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class, comprising intellectuals and elites who, in their attempts to imitate the Whites, ended up exceeding them in their indifferent and callous ways. Sartre in the preface to Wretched of the Earth introduces the bourgeoisie class as “fabricated...colonized subjects in a system of divide and rule; elsewhere, it has killed two birds with one stone: the colony is both settlement and exploitation” (Fanon xivi). The euphoria of Nigerians’ independence did not last long because their very black leaders, “became as white as those of White men, some even whiter” (Okoh 13). They did not only mimic them in manners but also in actions as their brutal treatment of Nigerians rendered them as inhumane as their colonial masters. Fanon aptly describes it,

The colonized intellectual learned from his master that the individual must assert himself. The colonist bourgeois hammered into the colonized mind the notion of a society of individuals where each is locked in his subjectivity... “Brother”, “Sister”, “Comrade” are words outlawed by the colonialist bourgeoisie because in their thinking my brother is my wallet and my comrade, my scheming (11).

Likewise, in post-independence Nigeria, after 1960, the leaders failed to address or reconstruct the colonial fissures that had fractured the nation, leaving it vulnerable to deepening internal divisions. Instead of fostering unity and healing, they contributed to the escalation of ethnic hostilities, often using these divisions as tools to manipulate and exploit the populace for their own political gain. Ethnic sentiments among the natives were deliberately inflamed, creating a volatile and antagonistic environment that intensified the already precarious situation. The fragile peace was shattered as the leaders prioritized personal and factional interests over national cohesion, plunging the country into chaos.

The turbulent political climate claimed the lives of many leaders, who became victims of the very hostility they had fueled. Julie, through her cries and reflections, laments the post-independent colonial conditions that plagued the nation, perpetuating cycles of violence and instability. These conditions robbed Nigeria of the opportunity to establish peace, harmony, and, most importantly, a truly democratic government. Sartre, in his sharp critique of the lingering effects of colonization, aptly states, “this barbaric explosion of madness is putting them in the same boat as the wretched colonists” (iiv), drawing attention to the perpetuation of the colonial legacy through local actors.

The assassination of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria's first prime

minister, in 1966 marked the beginning of a grim chapter in the nation's history. His death was followed by the murder of Major General Ironsi, who had orchestrated a military coup but was later betrayed and killed by his own ADC. The same year, the secession of three eastern states ignited bloody civil wars that tore the nation apart. During this period of unrelenting turmoil, General Gowon, who had come to power amidst the chaos, was eventually deposed and replaced by Brigadier Ramat Mohammad. However, his fate too was sealed by assassination, underscoring the violent cycle of leadership transitions in the country.

The era of Sani Abacha, who seized power from 1993 to 1998, epitomized the height of authoritarian rule and the gross violation of human rights. His regime was characterized by unrelenting despotism, systemic corruption, and the exploitation of the nation's resources for personal gain. Abacha, much like the colonial masters before him, ruled with an iron fist, prioritizing the consolidation of his power over the well-being of the Nigerian people. His tenure stands as a grim reminder of how the leaders who inherited the reins of power after independence often mirrored the oppressive tendencies of their colonial predecessors, perpetuating a legacy of exploitation and repression rather than progress and reform.

After the year 2000, the riots took on the form of deep-seated ethnic animosities and rivalries between Muslim and Christian communities in Nigeria. Every fold of history witnessed intense bloodshed; each time the reason was probably different but the identity of blood was the same: the blood of innocent Nigerians. In her play, Okoh protests that all directions of the globe: the east, the north, the west, and the south, witnessed incessant torture and slaughter of the natives in massive numbers. Like termites, the bourgeoisie leaders ate up their land. Nigerians starved to death and suffered malnutrition and nakedness, yet the stomachs of Nigerian leaders kept on bulging out and out. The children and women died of hunger: helpless and penniless, in the land that is so rich in reserves.

The writer mourns this exploitation and sheer betrayal of Nigerian leaders, who at the time of decolonization, vowed to the subjects' promises of milk and honey: dreams realized later into acute starvation. The people reminded the corrupt leaders of their tradition of confessing sins, seeking forgiveness of deities, and acquiring ritual cleansing to save this piece of land, Nigeria, from an eternal curse, that befell on the colored people around the globe. The leaders, however, chose otherwise. To distance themselves from the

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poor class, they “built massive walls around their houses...put dogs in front of the iron gate to scare away uninvited guests” (Okoh 14).

This is how they mimicked their oppressors and directed the violence they received toward their fellow natives. However, all this violence, butchery, oppression, and suppression did not address their relentless suffering. The writer puts forth a question, “Did the killing solve the people’s problems? Did it quench their hunger and thirst?” (Okoh 15) All this masochism and cannibalism took place because of, what Fanon calls the ‘Epidermalization’ of colonialism and violence by the bourgeoisie class. Their sheer intoxication of power, wealth, and luxury prompts them to exploit every segment of society. Okoh in particular mentions how the women in Nigeria undergo humiliation. She gives the instance of her fourteen-year-old daughter who is raped and molested before her very eyes. Being the mother, she could not help her except for wailing, “My God! My God! What have we done to deserve this?” (Okoh 32). This reflects the profound helplessness people experienced during post-colonial times. In the warzone, the cries of stampeded women are hushed up by machine guns. Women alone underwent inexplicable torture by being victimized by their native blacks. They suffered: rape, incest, wife-battery, girl-child prostitution, women trafficking, female infanticide, widowhood rites, and genital mutilation (Okoh 41).

The communal rift between Muslims and Shias in Nigeria also gave rise to a devastating humanitarian crisis that continues to haunt the region. The violent attacks perpetrated by Boko Haram, a Jihadist circle notorious for its extremist agenda, reportedly caused the displacement of a staggering 2.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). These individuals were left without access to essential services such as food, shelter, education, or health facilities, pushing them into a state of utter desperation. Tragically, it was the very members of these IDP groups, stripped of their dignity and humanity, who targeted the displaced women of Nigeria. This included instances where law enforcement agencies such as soldiers and policemen were implicated in acts of violence and exploitation against these vulnerable women.

The tsunami of violence was repeatedly directed at the suffering peasant class, a group already burdened by the weight of poverty and instability. Frantz Fanon, in his profound analysis of post-colonial leadership, explored the psyche of leaders shaped by the colonial mindset and opined that the corrupt leaders of decolonized states had internalized lessons of violence from their colonial

predecessors. He argued that these colonizers had tutored post-colonial elites in prioritizing their self-interest above all else, just as the colonizers had done in the past. These corrupt, mimicking figures, whom Fanon referred to as mere shadows of their colonial masters, continued to look to their former oppressors for patronage and guidance. By doing so, they enabled the colonizers to maintain direct access and control over their former territories under the guise of influence and intervention. This persistent intervention ensured that the scars of colonization remained fresh and active in the decolonized states. The Human Rights Report of Nigeria 2017 stands as a stark example of this hypocritical mockery of the West, illustrating how a few black sheep within society allowed these injustices to flourish unchecked.

International actors, notably the United Kingdom, United States, European Union, and United Nations significantly improved their support to the Nigerian government in dealing with the Boko Haram conflict. Increased assistance in form of military training, supply of intelligence, surveillance, and communication equipment might be an indication of confidence in President Buhari's promise of military reform (par 26).

Thus, after contributing to the wretchedness of the colonized, the colonizers intervened, donning a new guise as saviors. When their previously plundered resources began to dwindle, they were suddenly reminded of their own neglected humanity. This humanity was then directed toward those from whom they had distanced themselves, treating them as less than human. After delineating all three barbaric folds of Nigerian history, Okoh inquires the audience about how this situation can be helped.

Should we continue to fold our arms and watch our oppressors reduce us to nothingness? Should we continue to watch them give guns to our children to kill for them while they shield themselves in their big mansions surrounded by tall massive walls watched over by policemen and dogs? Should we continue to watch the elites and politicians lead this nation through the path of self-annihilation? Should we continue to stay in the margin watching, praying hoping that our saviour will come to our rescue one day? (Okoh 34).

She diverts our attention to the group of women who can form "a cohesive political group based on sex solidarity" (36), who can hold the reins of leadership, where the patriarch is busy looting. She gives reference to the women out there in Britain, America, France, and the Netherlands, who risked their lives and fought with many of them imprisoned and executed. She invites the audience to transform their patriarchal notions and realize that the focus is

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now shifted to the women, who could be saviours of future Nigerians. She gives a clarion call to all women of Nigeria to stand iron before the atrocities and stand united for it is the discordant element of disunity that always has been providing plea to the exploiters to exploit them in new ways. She contemplates womanism as a social crusader: committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, men or women.

Womanism was a movement by black women whose demands differed from white feminism. Unlike feminists, they did not raise their voices to exact their rights, their demands, and their means. All they contemplated was the liberation of black people which can be realized by raising awareness among the groups of black communities: silenced historically. Buchi Emecheta adds that the feminism she subscribes to “is free of the shackles of Western romantic illusions and tends to be much more pragmatic” (par 20). The writer mentions all the female writers who are out there working to reverse the status quo, that is patriarchal image of women as docile, helpless beings with no control over their own fate. As a black woman, she saw black feminism as the logical political movement to fight against the never-ending oppression faced by all women of colour.

The writer’s discourse on global feminist movements and her pleading for unity together contribute to the much ‘Larger discourse.’ Nigerian women should take the lead, to show in the political arena and restore democracy, to correctly estimate their powers and dynamic roles they could play in bringing real change in Nigeria. So that, their dream of smelling, feeling, and hugging democracy could be realized; so that all Nigerians could witness the sunshine radiating through their faces and smiles dancing on their lips. The time when no high flowery speeches, empty promises, and resounding clichés would be heard from politicians and real freedom would be felt by all living in the blood-smitten soil of Nigeria. I would end my essay with the words of Fanon who explained in a very touching way: “I, the man of color, want only this: That the tool never possesses the man. That the enslavement of man by man cease forever. That is, of one by another. That it be possible for me to discover and to love man, wherever he may be” (231 Fanon).



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