

THE RAPE OF FATIMAH: A TRAGEDY IN GENDER POLITICS

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Abstract

Set in 1950s Kissy Mess-Mess village in Sierra Lionne, Nabie Swaray's tragedy, *The Rape of Fatimah* (1976), demonstrates Africa's diverse ideologies, tribal traditions, religious multiplicity and mythical, indigenous culture that marginalize women in a dominant patriarchal community. Fifteen year old Fatimah's rape, by her step-father and uncle, as a sacrifice to attain chief- power, traumatically scars her physically and psychologically, depersonalizing her, robbing her of 'voice' and being. Diagnosed as bewitched, she is forced to participate in communal ceremonial practices of ritualism, mourning, witchcraft and marriage, to reaffirm her ascribed feminine role as a virgin bride, but fails and dies.

Nene, woman avenger and guardian, is sister of Makalay, (Chief 's wife whom he murdered with their daughter ,to protect himself), breaks free from the 'male order' by challenging "the categorization of womanhood", asserting to her rapist husband that she is "not a woman". Her conjuring of ancestral spirits, her worship ritual, sacrificial ceremony and libations poured at Makalay's grave, reassert her position and authority over patriarchy and the empirical world, through the supernatural. Similarly Makalay is powerfully repositioned as a 'voiced' ghost haunting Chief, driving him to insanity and death. Finally Fatimah gains supernatural power as a dead body in a coffin, knocking down her rapist uncle to his death. Calamity befalls the whole community when Chief murders his women clan. No longer marginalized, Swaray's heroines are empowered through death and the supernatural, in a world where patriarchy cannot function.

Swaray unearths African traditions, cult, customs, beliefs, legends and folklore as part of its generic character that allegorically marginalizes Africa from the rest of the world. "The dark continent" remains, like its women, shrouded in darkness, primitivism, and superstition as the dull tabule and the wailing women strike the end note of the tragedy of Fatimah and of Africa.

تراجيديا اغتصاب فاطيما: تراجيديا فى سياسات الفصل بين الجنسين

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الملخص

تقع احداث تراجيديا "نبيه سوارى" اغتصاب فاطيما (1976) فى عام 1950 بقريه "كيسى مس مس" بسيرايون لتقدم الايديولوجيات الافريقية المتنوعة والتقاليد القبائليه والديانات المختلفه والاسطوريه والثقافه الاهليه التى تهمش النساء فى مجتمع دكورى مهيمن. ان اغتصاب فاطيما ذات الخمسة عشر عام على يد زوج والدتها وعمها- كاضحية للحصول على سلطة الزعامة - يؤديها ويصدمها جسديا وسيكولوجيا: سارقا لصوتها، ماحيا لشخصيتها وكيانها. بما انها شخصت على انها قد سحرت، ففرض عليها المشاركة الجماعية والاحتفالية فى طقوس الحداد والسحر والزواج لكى تؤكد دورها المنسوب اليها كانشى وعروس بكر، ولكنها تفشل وتموت.

اما "نينى" فهى المرآة المنتقمة و الواصية، وهى اخت "ماكالاي" (زوجة الزعيم الذي قتلها عمدا هى وابنتها لكى يحمى نفسه). "نينى" تتحرر من النظام الذكورى بتحديها "للتصنيف النسائى" مؤكدة لزوجها المغتصب انها "ليست انثى". فان تحضيرها لارواح الاجداد وطقوس العبادة واحتفالية الاضحية والاراقة على قبر "ماكالاي"، يعيد هيكله منصبها ووضعها وسلطتها على العالم الذكورى والموضوعى من خلال اكتسابها لما هو خارق للطبيعة. تشبها فمكالاي تعيد مكانتها بقوة كشبح متحدث يطارد الزعيم حتى الجنون والموت. واخيرا "فاطيما" تحصل على قوة خارقة للطبيعة كجثة فى كفن تداهم وتضرب عمها المغتصب حتى الموت. ان الهلاك يقع على الجماعة عندما يقتل الزعيم عمدا نسوة اهله. ان بطلات "سوارى" التى لم تعد مهمشة تقوت من خلال الموت والقوة الخارقة للطبيعة فى عالم لا تستطيع الذكورية ان تعمل فيه او تديره.

ان "سوارى" يكشف التقاليد الافريقية والعبادات والعادات والاعتقادات والاساطير والفولكلور الذى يشكل شخصية افريقيا التى مجازا تهمشها عن بقية العالم. ان القارة المظلمة تظل مثل نساءها مكفنة بالظلام والبدائية والخرافة بينما تدق الطبول وتولول النساء معلنة النهاية التراجيدية لفاطيما وافريقيا.

"A woman is trapped within the frontiers of her body and even of her species and consequently feels exiled both by the general clichés that make up a common consensus and by the very powers of generalization intrinsic to language."
(Lechte 1999, 79)

Categorically, Nabie Swaray's tragedy The Rape of Fatimah(1976) dramatizes the marginalization and exile of women in the tribal African community of 1950 Kissy Mess Mess village in Freetown, Sierra Leone, as a result of the generic character of Africa that allegorically marginalizes it from the rest of the world and Europe. The "Dark Continent"¹ remains, like its people, shrouded in darkness, primitivism and superstition. Swaray unearths Africa's diverse ideologies, degenerate tribal traditions, religious plurality, mythical and indigenous cults, in order to foreground the mechanisms of the dysfunctional patriarchal community where feminine and gender politics are at work. Thus, this paper aims at showing how the conflicting gender paradigms within the primordial African context are responsible for the tragic death of Fatimah and the general marginalization of women.

Fifteen year old Fatimah is raped by her step-father Drissa and uncle Biambadi, as a sacrifice to attain chief power, but Julia Kristeva describes such sacrifice as "the sacred transgression of the law" (Lechte 1999, 74). Traumatically scarred, both physically and psychologically, she is diagnosed by her aunt, Nene, as bewitched. Depersonalized and dispossessed of her virginity, she becomes hysterical and inarticulate, haunted by the threat of discovery and murder. She screams:

I am nothing... nothing is left of me...they have
taken away my life, skinned it away from my guts...
I fought with all my strength but I was overpowered,
defeated and paralyzed ... (Swaray 2008, 5)

At this very early stage in action, Fatimah is not only overpowered and repressed by the male clan, but she is paralyzed, and 'objectified'

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into a useless and helpless 'thing'. In an attempt to find refuge, she seeks union with the women of her tribe, while at the same time totally excluding men from her world.

She says:

No! No!

I want no man to come near me.

I'll go where there are only women ...

And then, I'll live there forever! (Swaray 2008, 125)

Bewitched by a haunting cotton tree dripping with her virgin blood, she narrates the masculine witch-hunt, as follows:

I...watched them running away with it.

I cried, "Give it back to me!

Give it back to me!" {Swaray 2008, 5}

Fatimah's loss of the most precious thing that makes up the feminine being and her failure to retrieve it, magnifies the social danger and threat. With the loss of her virginity she ceases to exist on the social, cultural and political levels as she is expelled from both orders, the male and the female. Neither can accept her in her present condition, even though she is the victim of both. Preordained to be sacrificed, she is forced to meet her tragic fate alone. The prime image associated with Fatimah, namely the white cotton tree sullied by blood, can be symbolically and critically relayed as follows: The "cultural values [of America], emerge as a result of an inscription on the body, understood as a medium ... a blank page; and in order for this inscription to signify, ... that medium must itself be destroyed – that is fully tranvaluated into a sublimated domain of values" (Butler 1990, 130).

Thus, from a gender perspective, Fatimah's body as a blank page is negatively inscribed by African cultural codes of sacrifice, with her virgin blood, as a prerequisite for the attainment of chief power. As a medium she is tranvaluated into a sublimated domain of marginality and stigma. Hence, Africa's Foucauldian "figure of history" becomes the repressive "relentless writing instrument" of cultural inscription (Butler 1990, 130). Ironically, it is this very culture that sets the codes and laws, then turns back on itself to nullify them.

From this standpoint, Nene, humming an Arabic dirge against "the swift and furious roll of drums..." (Swaray 2008, 48) becomes woman avenger and guardian, determined to break free from marginality and the male 'order', and to avenge Fatimah, on learning of the double murder of her twin sister, Makalay, also the chief's wife, and her daughter Abbi. Nene as stepmother, "challenges the categorization of womanhood" (Bates xvii) by asserting to her rapist husband that she is 'not a woman'. Though the world of Swaray's women "is pervasively patriarchal and their anatomy restricts them in mobility and accomplishment, reigning in domesticity as overseers of hearth, home and marriage ceremony" (Bates xvii), in order to assert her position and authority over patriarchy and the empirical world, Nene uses the supernatural, conjuring ancestral spirits at Makalay's grave, practicing ritual worship, sacrificial ceremony and pouring libation.

A gender political reading of the play would confirm Beauvoir and Wittig's "identification of women with 'sex' ... [as] a conflation of the category of women with the ostensibly sexualized features of their bodies and hence, a refusal to grant freedom and autonomy to women as it is ... enjoyed by men" (Butler 1990, 19). Drissa and Biambadi's patriarchal power relations "replay and redistribute ... 'identifications' " through a disnormative sexuality, subversion and oppression that are 'beyond', 'outside' and 'before' culture, which subvert the "heterosexual and Phallic cultural conventions" (Butler 1990, 30). Consequently, the category 'woman' in Swaray, does not mean the 'Other' of man, which according to the phallogocentric Western discourse, excludes her from culture and the Symbolic, but is rather an ontological entity of femininity. Fatimah is a 'body' objectified to conform to a socio-cultural paradigm of woman/female. By induction she becomes a negative cultural sign on the margins of society, materializing by delimitation, physically as a corporeal object enacting cultural conventions.

In her book, *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas contests that "all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and all margins are accordingly considered dangerous"² (Butler 1990, 132). Therefore, since Swaray's women are positioned at the margins of the social

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system because " the very contours of [their] 'body' are established through markings that ... establish specific codes of cultural coherence ... any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, posture, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies" (Butler 1990, 131). Thus, within Africa, "the construction of stable bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability" (Butler 1990, 132). Moreover, since women are "the body" or "site" where open systems converge and since incest is unsanctioned by the hegemonic order, the whole system and community of Kissy Mess Mess is endangered, remaining outside any hegemonic order due to its codes, norms and traditions. Therefore, incest and rape reinscribe the boundaries of the feminine body along new lines of taboo, through exclusion and domination, creating a plight of female subjectivity that relegates women to the realm of the inert, lifeless, inessential matter. Fatimah's internal fixity as a subject, her "internal locale of gender identity" (Butler 1990, 134) is challenged and displaced, so as that of Kissy Mess Mess, as her body comes to signify the prohibitive law as a "signifying lack" (Butler 1990, 135). If Fatimah lacks her virginity, then Africa, through the transgression of the law, lacks signification according to western criteria. Significantly, Abbas who has studied medicine in England for ten years, and now returns to Kissy Mess Mess in an attempt to help his country, becomes confused in the face of superstition and primitivism that reign paramount. In addition, because taboo prescribes boundaries of and on the body, putting limits on the "socially hegemonic" (Butler 1990, 131), the breaking and trespassing of such social and cultural hegemony unleashes chaos, calamity, insanity and death.

Generally speaking, Swaray's female personae are political signifiers, as "empty signs which come to bear phantasmatic investments of various kinds (MacKenzie 7). They face the task, according to Butler and Wittig, of trying to achieve subjectivity, depending on their ability "to cast off the reification of sex imposed on

them and which deforms them as partial or relative beings" (Butler 1990, 117). Non-existent on their own accord, these women 'evacuated' of signification, are recast according to various cultural feminine significations that bear no relation to their human entity. They shift from daughter, wife, mother etc. which reflects the poignancy of their physical commodification.

What creates the tragedy in the play is the fact that the "contours of [Fatimah's] body are clearly marked as the taken for granted ground or surface upon which gender significations are inscribed, a mere facticity devoid of value, prior to significance" (Butler 1999, 129). By biology, anatomy and physiology, she becomes a "feminine materiality", a "passive medium" or "instrument" on which socio-cultural meanings are inscribed (Butler 1990, 8). Therefore, if Fatimah is materiality and matter, and if language is what provides differentiation and meaning to materiality, then in order to become a speaking subject, an 'I', not a mere corporeal body, will entitle death and destruction for her. Rather, she becomes a "linguistic absence", impossible to be "a grammatically denoted substance" in a masculine discourse" (Butler 1990, 10), a negativity and a loss exceeding representation, becoming neither 'Other' nor 'lack' but a mute body –"a prediscursive" and "politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (Butler 1990, 10)). Accordingly, Fatimah has no agency, no "normative concept" altogether and so she is legitimately and culturally oppressed and annihilated by the two male heads, by her fiancé and by death. Her voice is unbelievably, disjointed, and incomprehensible. To overcome this "linguistic absence", to become a "linguistic presence" able to name her rapists and reveal the truth, she ultimately has to die. This means that for Swaray, there is impossibility for female presence, centralization and voice in the African patriarchal society. Moreover, as signifiers, his women cannot be radically represented "since every signifier ...produces the expectation of a unity, and a full and final recognition as Subject—which they do not acquire. [Therefore] as "the 'unpresentable' and the opaque", "the masculine mode of signification marks the female body as "marked off" from the domain of the signifiable" (Butler 1990, 12). Indeed, Africa is also "marked off" as a preculture or prior to culture stage, awaiting signification and inscription, that Swaray presents as a

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destructive political "incision of the masculine signifiers, for entrance into language and culture" (Butler 1990, 8). Therefore, if Fatimah parallels Africa, then the incision of Drissa and Biambadi as chief head signifiers, who rape her to fulfill Kissy Mess Mess' political ideology that will allow it to enter the stage of politics, culture and language, is a failure for males, females and Africa itself, because its methodology is primitivistic and tabooed.

To the very end, Fatimah is made to fulfill the feminine role she has been ascribed. Ready to marry her off to the chief's son, she is dressed in a sacrificial gown and forced to participate in communal ceremonial practices of ritualism, mourning, witchcraft and marriage, in order to reaffirm her image as a virgin bride, according to masculine discourse. But failing in this 'performative act', as it is discovered by tribal women that she is not a virgin, makes a stable gender identity an illusion, a mere appearance of "being" a gender, open to interpretation and resignification because she is neither a virgin nor a bride, as the former nullifies the latter. All her feminine signifieds collapse, as the whole conception around her identity turns out to be a sexually oriented fantasy. Her "... acts, ... gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core ... maintained for the purpose of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality" (Butler 1990, 136). Thus, the ritualistic marriage ceremony where group women chant around Fatimah, is an imitation of the "myth of originality ... of original identification which serves as a determining cause, [where her] gender identity [is] reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings ... " (Butler 1990, 138). Becoming what others make of her, she is stigmatized as incapable of belonging to the female category, tagged as a 'thing', a lacking opaque object that is unrepresentable because she fails all criteria.

Consequently, based on Judith Butler's dictum, to counteract this failure, there must be 'subversive action', a calling for "gender trouble" through performance, which is done through the free-floating persona of Godmamy, the old aged female leader of tribal women. She makes of gender an elaborate cultural fabrication—a pieced together patriarchal

socialization that dictates an enforced political identity, as a social construction. The "repeated stylization of [her] body [is] a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1990, 33); namely a performance.

Godmamy's gender identity is reinvented by her ritualistic role as both male and female, as overseer of tribal marriage ceremony. Her fluidity of character allows an openness to resignification and recontextualization of gender identities. She is a "desexualization of the female body" (Bates xi). Masculinized with a painted charcoal bearded face, tall rugged physique, a sultan's cap, men's clothing, a huge dark boubou, a protruding scrotum hanging between her legs, she shifts the structure of the play dramatically from patriarchy to matriarchy as she displaces the cultural configuration and the law of heterosexual coherence, by denaturalizing sex and gender through performance. This reflects a dramatization of "the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity" (Butler 1999, 138). Her attempt at performing a masculine gender identity is dependent upon and theorized within masculine parameters. As a performer, she has three dimensions: according to anatomical sex, she is a 'female' and according to her gender identity, she is a 'woman'. However, from a gender performative respect, she is a 'male' who acquires authority. In contrast, chief Drissa, who is deranged now, wears a woman's red frock and walks barefoot carrying a stick; an appearance that again signals a shift in the gender order of Swaray's personae as they perform their roles according to the gain or loss of power and authority. Hence both Godmamy's and Drissa's identities are resignified and recontextualized, according to Phallus conceptualization and leadership.

Since "the Phallus [is] the authorizing signification of the Law that takes sexual difference as a presupposition of its own intelligibility ... [therefore] 'Being' the Phallus [as Godmamy] and 'having' the Phallus [as all males] denote divergent sexual positions, or non-positions ... within language. To 'be' the Phallus is to be the 'signifier' of the desire of the Other and to appear as this signifier" (Butler 1990, 44). As such, by posing as the Phallus in her masquerade dress, as the 'Other'

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constituting "not the limit of masculinity in a feminine alterity, but the site of a masculine self-elaboration" (Butler 1990, 44), Godmamy reflects the power of the Phallus and signifies it through her costume and physique, embodies it and supplies the site to which it penetrates, becoming "both its 'object' ... instrument ... and the sign and promise of its power" (Butler 1990, 45). As its "instrument of identity" (Butler 1990, 44), she gives the Phallus resignification, which it had lost by being defeated through discovery (the two chiefs). It is noteworthy to add that with the loss of signification, there was also a loss of power on the part of male authorities. At the same time, Godmamy becomes the "lack" because her seizure of the masculine position is only a false temporary creation, not the Real. She, therefore, wields power from masculine subjects and becomes the image of the Phallus only in its extended form. At the same time, Drissa loses power, authority and signification as he is discovered, becomes deranged, and wears female clothes. From a socio-cultural-political perspective, Godmamy complies with masculinity out of necessity, in order to assure that the groom receives a virgin bride, using physical violence to make Fatimah confess. It is Godmamy also, who prefigures "the workings of 'sex', where 'sex' is an obligatory injunction for the body [of Fatimah] to become a cultural sign, to materialize itself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility ... " (Butler 1990, 139). But the obedience and compliance of Fatimah brings catastrophe to the whole tribe. It is because the male clan members "invoke the prerogative of identity through marriage, a repeated act of symbolic differentiation ... [and] Exogamy distinguishes and binds patronymically specific kinds of men ... [so that] Patrilineality is secured through the ritualistic expulsion of women and, reciprocally the ritualistic importation of women" (Butler 1990, 39), that Africa is forever doomed basically, because of its degenerate patriarchal ideology and traditions. After Fatimah's public disgrace and humiliation, and her seizure with feverish fits of madness, she chants a folkloric tragedy of a young girl mourning the death of her mother, who goes into the forest, gets lost and is eaten by a leopard. In the song she laments the girl dying unmarried and with no children. The symbolic relation to her own story and predicament is quite clear here, as she too had lost her mother, was trapped in the web

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of the African cultural wilderness and will die unmarried, without fulfilling the social and political feminine ideology of her community; and failing to function as the instrument of desire and procreation. Between laughing and weeping, she runs back and forth on stage, beats her chest and stamps her foot, shakes and trembles as she goes round in circles, screaming hysterically: "Kill me! Kill me! Kill me! And they pierced the needle right into my heart" (Swaray 2008, 126). Critically, the piercing image of the heart is the incision into the female made by the male, both literally through rape and philosophically in the domain of femininity. Finally she falls to the ground and dies. Nene openly rebels against this whole system of feminine oppression and marginalization, crying:

"I can't sit here and watch womanhood
disgraced and ridiculed" .(Swaray 2008, 110)

Thus, with the aid of the supernatural, she invokes her dead sister, Makalay and repositions her as a revengeful, voiced ghost haunting Drissa to insanity and death by confronting him with his evil deeds. Similarly, Fatimah's coffin acquires supernatural powers, knocking Biambadi to death after hitting him in his privates; a gesture signifying the defeat of masculinity.

The play demonstrates how " ... all gender ontology is reducible to the play of appearances. At the same time " masquerade suggests that there is a 'being' or ontological specification of femininity prior to the masquerade, a feminine desire or demand that is masked and capable of disclosure, that indeed might promise an eventful disruption and displacement of the phallogocentric signifying economy" (Butler 1990, 47). It is through Nene and Makalay that disruption of the masculine order comes about, by means not of feminine empowerment, but rather from within Africa itself, specifically, the supernatural element, as Africa counter-acts its own ideologies, its own people, its own self. Though Godmamay's ritualistic role was an attempt at being masculine and according to Irigaray, " ... the masquerade... is what women do ... in order to participate in man's desire, but at the cost of giving up their

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own " (Butler 1990, 47), she failed to resolve Fatimah's crisis or fulfill patriarchal matrimonial desires because as a gendered performative body, her enactments constitute a fabricated reality within a public and social discourse. As such, this "public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body ..." (Butler 1990, 136) made Godmamy fail as a female to guarantee a virgin bride and as a male to attain this by force and power.

From a gendered point of view, Fatimah "is a body, described through the language of surface and force, weakened through a 'single drama' of domination, inscription and creation" (Bouchard et al., 1977, 150). The tragic death of chief male heads shows that "ideas about ... purifying, demarcating and punishing transgression have as their main function to impose [a] system on an inherently untidy experience [; that of incest and rape] (Douglas 1969, 4). At the end, Nene comes on stage sprinkling water from a bowl; a libation scene that intensifies further the reign of the African cult. Abbas in a tone of despair says: "Our country is dying" (Swaray 2008, 82) as it is "deathly ill" (Swaray 2008, 130) because of its crippling traditions. The tragedy closes on the sound of wailing women, a beating tabule, while Africa remains beyond signification because it is prior to signification and form, and incapable of it due to its ideology.

To conclude, "gender [in Swaray] becomes an act, a performance, reenacted, reexperienced in a ritualized form of legitimating social meanings, a stylized repetition of ... bodily gestures, movements and styles that create an illusion of a gendered self. Gender is not a model of identity, but a concept of a constituted 'social' temporality" (Butler 1990, 130). Swaray's characterization disowns his female personae of any identity, save that based on a social gendered performative recontextualization. Failing to fulfill the criteria of signification, befalls them with a tragedy that encompasses the whole community.

ENDNOTES

1. This description of Africa is borrowed from Henry Morton Stanley's documentary chronicle *Through the Dark Continent* (1877).
2. This quotation refers to Judith Butler's own rephrasing and interpretation of Mary Douglas' concepts.
3. This is my own phrasing.

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