Feminism at a crossroads: Leke Ogunfeyimi’s example in Weaker Sex.

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Abstract
Since the contact with the European world due to colonialism, African societies and their cultural values have been subjected to scrutiny and change. Ideologies have questioned cultural values and orientations, exposing their weaknesses and getting exposed in return. One of such ideologies is feminism that challenge male dominance and cultural/religious mechanisms that undermine the freedom of the female gender. In our society today, tension continues to mount against traditional practices from both Christianity and Islam which question, and even condemn, some aspects of traditional African value-systems. In this paper, I examine how Leke Ogunfeyimi’s play, Weaker Sex, dramatizes this kind of tension through its protagonist, Bomane Sosu’s, approach to her femininity. Bomane’s radical feminist posture, underscored by her traditional consciousness, specifically of the Yoruba, highlights the argument about the contradictions of feminism as an ideology that challenges (perceived) women oppression, including its implications in our own society.

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Background

**Bomane:** I love male children. They are the passages through which every family line is easily traced.

**Kemi:** Why then did you not have one for daddy?

**Bomane:** I think it’s daddy who did not have one for me.

**All:** What!?

**Bomane:** Y-e-s! *Would the mango tree bring forth the fruit of an orange?* Your father did not have male semen in him. I think I was created stronger than he…I gave him strong sex to produce my type. He was a weaker sex. *Or don’t our people say, when a woman gives birth to a female child, it means she has fell her husband?* I felled your father five times. He is a weaker sex… To justify his weakness, he ran away from home. He did not know how to bring out something from nothing (9; emphasis added).

One of the challenges (or is it psychological error?) imposed on colonized nations by their colonizers has remained ideologies, one of which is feminism. Among other things, what these ideologies (and most especially feminism which concerns us here) do to the psyche of the colonized is a “split in [their] epistemological and ontological habitation,” or more seriously a “divide within the self, indeed, a series of traumatic cleavages” (Supriya Nair,130), which eventually results in “double consciousness” to use W.E.B Du Bois’ term for “the sense of looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (351), or what Ngugi wa Thiong’o also describes as the “vacillating mentality...evasive self-contemplation, the existential anguished human condition, or the man-torn- between-two-worlds-facedness” (Ngugi, 22). According to Ngugi:

Colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one’s environment. It starts with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualization, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in the home and in the community. *It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale it is like producing a*
Ngugi argues that the violence of the colonial encounter, which is often more virulent as ideology, does not actually “set free” the colonized in most cases contrary to Frantz Fanon’s vision that it does, “from her/his inferiority complex and from her/his despair and inaction; it makes her/him fearless and restores her/his self-respect” (Fanon,74). Rather, as Ngugi contends, it produces individuals that are more confused, but emboldened by their ignorance. Feminism, and its sweeping condemnation of social structure and hierarchy based on the notion of gender inequality, draws our attention to such an instance of “split in epistemological and ontological reality” or “double consciousness” that I aim to examine in Leke Ogunfeyimi’s play, *Weaker Sex*, by looking at its protagonist.

Needless to say that a number of religious and cultural practices in most colonized nations do function as mechanisms of oppressing women (and men in some cases), oppression of women (and children) is not entirely a third world/colonized nations, specifically African, problem. As Niyi Osundare points out, while some aspects of our tradition are clearly “oppressive and reactionary [with their] rigid oligarchic and feudalistic political structure dominated by kings and queens and emirs and chiefs; gods and goddesses; high priests and low priests, all feeding upon the sweat and spirit of the common man and woman” (9,19) and frustrating youthful change and/or genuine social development, people in the developed world [are equally] faced with “virulent atomisation of modern capitalist society and the philistinisation of values, rigid division of labour and the deification of consumerism” which has produced in turn, the marginalisation and “commodification” of women as sex-objects.

In this paper, I examine such notion of “oppression” and “marginalization” of women including a radical reaction to such oppressive mechanism through the lens of Ogunfeyimi’s play, *Weaker Sex*, which dramatizes the tension between feminist ideology and African cultural values, as represented by its central character, Bomane Sosu whose radical feminist posture is inadvertently subsumed in her traditional consciousness, specifically of the Yoruba. The paper concludes by using the context of the play to highlight the contradictions of feminism as an ideology that challenges (perceived) women oppression, including its implications in our own society.

**Feminism: an overview**

Feminism, as we are reminded by Linda Gordon, is “an analysis of women’s subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it” (170). Although one could begin the history of feminism from the prehistoric times and its many forms: goddess religions and matriarchy in Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean regions, the famous *hetaerae* of Athens, the mystical
rhetoric of holy women in European Middle Ages, the tradition of the learned during the Renaissance, the *beaux esprits* of the Enlightenment or the struggles of the European bourgeois women for education and civil rights in the aftermath of the French Revolution and many others, the central argument of feminism has, however, remained that women are oppressed, marginalized, and/or brutalized by the male-dominated, male-centred social systems across the globe.

Scholarship on feminism has however categorized its growth into what has come to be identified as “waves.” Emerging in the context of industrial society and liberal politics, the First-wave feminism was nonetheless identified with the liberal women’s rights movement and early socialist feminism of the late 19th and early 20th century in the United State and Europe, its main interest being equal opportunities for women as men. Second-wave of feminism, developed sometime in the 1960s and 1970s, gained mostly from radical groups that championed women’s empowerment and rights. Although marked by divergences from mostly women of colour and third-world women who insisted that their own experience differs from those of White/Western feminists, the growth and influence of the second-wave feminism extended through the 1980s to the 1990s, into the emergence of the postcolonial “feminism” that was marked by neoliberal global politics. Third-wave feminism is marked by its “multiplicity in transversal theory and politics” and ambiguity (Kroløkke and Sorensen, 1-23). In this essay, I focus on this last group of feminism and its dramatization in *Weaker Sex*.

**Leke Ogunfeyimi and the question of feminism, oppression and gender (in)equality**

Essayist, poet, actor and social crusader, Leke Ogunfeyimi is an award-winning playwright and theatre director. Studied for both Bachelor and Master of Art in English at the University of Lagos, Akoka (specializing in Dramatic Literature and Criticism) and a PhD from the University of Ibadan, Ogunfeyimi’s drama generally dealt with traditional issues, royalty, sacrifice and heroism, as evidenced in some of his previous plays, *Sacrifice the King* and *Oba Olugbodomokun*, in which he celebrates Yoruba tradition, heroism and selfless sacrifice.

Likely to be considered Ogunfeyimi’s foray into “contemporary” social politics, *Weaker Sex* straddles the point between a traditional sensibility and contemporary reality: traditional in the sense of a deeply-conscious Yoruba perception of the symbolism, discursive and practical reality of gender and femininity; and contemporary in terms of the expression of

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3 Ogunfeyimi’s *Sacrifice the King* won the 2nd runner-up prize and honourable mention of the ANA/NDDC Drama award in 2004.

4 I directed *Oba Olugbodomokun* as the Practical Theatre Workshop play of the Dept. of English, University of Lagos, in 2010.
the idea of modern femaleness. Drawing extensively from the social reality of his time, and using diverse language that ranges from everyday conversation, proverbs and aphorisms from Yoruba stock of expression and the Bible, Ogunfeyimi tells the story of a single-mother, Bomane Sosu who, abandoned by her husband because she is unable to produce a male child but five girls, struggles to raise the girls and train them to have different perception of what it means to be a girl and/or woman in a changed society.

Although a male dramatist who forays into a “female/feminist” territory as it were, Ogunfeyimi’s gender is not at issue, his intentions (expressed through Bomane) are. Inadvertently, I would argue, Ogunfeyimi addresses in this play, some concerns already expressed by several African intellectuals writing today about issues affecting women, arguing that there is the need “for African women to break the chain of gender oppression, while simultaneous calling on African societies to dismantle all apparatus with which they oppress and stigmatize women, and both groups to re-examine their positions on postcolonial class struggles” (Jita Allan,197). As Tuzyline Jita Allan also writes, this call for “critical transformation” as it were, insists on bringing back to centre stage the often-quoted mantra of male superiority at the detriment of women and the “seductive tyranny of patriarchy” (198), that women must resist at all cost. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie puts this argument clearly in how she perceives the male-dominated society’s reaction to gender equality. She contends that African men “seem to be often riled by the idea of equality between men and women. They are not opposed to equal opportunity, equal pay for equal work, or equal education, but with equality between men and women, they are uncomfortable” (209). Consequently, she incites women to action, “[M]arried women are afraid to shake the status quo; they are afraid and want security through men; they are harsher on other women than men are; they cling to the vanishing respectability of being married” (211), a call to which I want to argue that Ogunfeyimi “recruits” his protagonist, Bomane, to respond to.

Moreover, the focus of Ogunfeyimi’s play recalls Pierre Bourdieu’s contention that “the producer of a work of art is not the artist but the field of production as a universe of belief which produces the value of the work of art as a fetish” (229). Radical as it were, Ogunfeyimi’s intentions could be understood from the perspective of Judith Clavir’s (following Robin Morgan) notion of “metaphysical feminism” which recalls Anne Koedt’s “Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” as I will show shortly, and Shulamith Firestone’s “sex class” theory. According to Clavir:

One woman’s experience is all women’s experience, because all women have a bond which is eternal, biological, and historical. Women’s culture with its rituals, poetry, and magic is an expression of their very body chemistry; and it is this chemistry with its limitless energy that patriarchs of all classes, nations, and eras of history try to
dominate and control. This biology and this oppression bonds [sic] together all women who have ever lived (404-5).

While Clavir projected a universalist notion of women oppression that does not take into account cultural differences, Firestone’s “a materialist view of history based on sex itself” (5), stressed the inequality between men and women, not only through the physical differences of their biological components but also the functions of those differences:

Unlike economic class, sex class sprang directly from a biological reality: men and women were created different, and not equally privileged...this difference of itself did not necessitate the development of a class system---the domination of one group by another---the reproductive functions of these differences did. The biological family is an inherently unequal power distribution (8; emphasis in the original).

In concluding, Firestone demanded a revolution to uproot all forms of female oppression and male domination:

[Un]less revolution uproots the basic social organization, the biological family---the vinculum through which the psychology of power can be smuggled---the tapeworm of exploitation can never be annihilated. We shall need a sexual revolution much larger than---inclusive of---a socialist one to truly eradicate all class systems. (12)

Juliet Mitchell was, however, of a contrary opinion. According to Mitchell:

To say sex dualism was the first oppression and that it underlies all oppression may be true, but it is a general, non-specific truth, it is simplistic materialism, no more. Af...after all we can say there has always been a master and a servant class, but it does matter how these function...; there have always been classes, as there have always been sexes, how do these operate within any given, specific society? Without such knowledge (historical materialism) we have not the means of overcoming them (90; emphasis in the original).

Mitchell stressed that, primarily, the “women’s position in society is in the home---and outside it, in production” (173). Whereas Mitchell’s “admonition” was a fine refinement of vexed notions championed by an array of feminists of various persuasion, it did not seem to amount to much where Anne Koedt was concerned, as clearly expressed in her essay, The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm.

Koedt, an American radical feminist and founding member of the group, New York Radical Feminists, challenged the previously-held notion about female sexuality and the way it was presented, especially by none other than Sigmund Freud. According to Koedt, “Women have been defined sexually in terms of what pleases men; our own biology has not been properly analyzed. Instead, we are fed the myth of the liberated women and her vaginal orgasm—an orgasm which in fact does not exist” (187). Writing further, Koedt contended that, “It was Freud's feelings about women's secondary and inferior relationship to men that formed
the basis for his theories on female sexuality. Once having laid down the law about the nature of our sexuality, Freud not so strangely discovered a tremendous problem of frigidity in women. His recommended cure for a woman who was frigid was psychiatric care. She was suffering from failure to mentally adjust to her ‘natural’ role as a woman (198-9). In the words of Hester Eisenstein, Koedt challenged the myth of sexuality that Freud and others perpetuated which was that, for women to achieve “true” orgasm they must experience penetration by a penis. While Koedt’s demonstration of how men controlled women by means of their control over the sexual act was a very strong statement, as Eisenstein argues, it drew its strength from the works of feminists such as Elizabeth Janeway’s “social mythology” and Kate Millet’s notion of “sexual politics” (Eisenstein,9-12), and many others, which have explored the same idea of women oppression as a result of male-chauvinism and patriarchy.

Janeway and Millet were among the array of feminist scholars identified with the second wave of feminism in the 1970s who sought to “change” those situations and socio-cultural mechanisms often generally grouped under patriarchy which, they contented, are instrumental to female oppression. Janeway, substituting “patriarchy” for “social mythology” argued that the “subordination of woman to man” was done through a persistent and obsolete socio-cultural system that emphasized “woman’s place is in the home” (51). She contended that, by entrenching such an illusion and a set of beliefs about sexual roles, women were stereotyped by the male-dominated society and forced to exchange “private power in return for public submission. That is the regular, orthodox bargain by which men rule the world and allow women to rule their own place” (56). As such, the power that women exert over their children at home and in the domestic sphere, is only a compensation for those exerted by men in the public sphere. Millet, on her own part, focused specifically on the sexual relations between men and women. In defining her notion of “sexual politics,” Millet contended that men’s control over women often take place in the sexual act itself; thus, “sexual conquest” of women by men, shows a relationship of domination and oppression in the Hegelian sense (Millet, qtd in Eisenstein,11-2). While Koedt’s essay, building on Janeway and Millet’s as I have shown, formed part of the so-called sexual revolution of the 1970s, the work also broke societal barriers regarding what was considered acceptable to discuss.5

As I will show shortly, Weaker Sex dramatizes Bomane’s expression of the same Koedtian feminist ideology, of “sexual freedom, the political significance of sexual pleasure, and the psychological roots of male domination and female subordination” (Gerhard,449), by not only questioning some of the long-held belief about the roles of men and women in her

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society, but also encouraging her daughters to do so. However, in asserting such an outlook, Bomane also draws legitimacy from traditional belief, part of which her notion of feminism challenges. It is this kind of tension that Ogunfeyimi creates in the play, *Weaker Sex*, as we shall come to see. While Ogunfeyimi attempts to do many things in the play: presents an argument for female superiority, feminist radicalism, contemporary perception of sex and sexuality among others, he also draws from the Yoruba epistemology and philosophy that what is seen is a representation of the unseen, a cultural sensibility which underscores the gender dynamics that rests on the definition and use of power (Olajubu, 85); it is from this specific perspective that I will also try to examine the play, and conclude by examining its social implication.

**Weaker Sex: Seizing men “by the balls,” exposing our rump in return!**

Although we are already in the middle of her life’s struggle by the time the play starts, Bomane does not seem perturbed as the stage direction informs us:

*Light reveals Bomane – a woman in her late forty’s – wearing a short jeans knickers and a spaghetti house-wear revealing her shining, light and spotless complexion. She is sitting legs-crossed on an arm chair facing the audience in a palour furnished to the taste of a middle-class African woman with a bar of assorted drinks. Beside her on a stool is a bottle of Big Guinness stout beer and a half-filled glass cup from which she sips at intervals.* (4)

Set against the background of music about women and the huge frame on the wall that reads, “Weaker Sex Influence,” we are brought into the world of a woman who exudes self-confidence and does not take nonsense from her daughters whom she will not hesitate to stretch on the floor and trash to her contentment as she claims. Yet, she loves them all as she also claims and does show in her interactions with them, even as she asserts herself as “an African woman [whose] home must survive its turbulent time” (8). Clearly disappointed by her husband, Badmus Badamosi Sosu’s infidelity and abandonment, we are thus aware of the “turbulent time” that she and her daughters her going through but which she is not allowing herself to be demoralized by. As a result, Bomane develops a radical posture towards sexuality and marriage.

In this first appearance, Ogunfeyimi does not waste time in raising the issue that Bomane and children will engage throughout the play. In spite of Bomane’s seeming “control” of situation as she aims to present to the audience (or the world?) by for examples a “*bottle of Big Guinness stout beer and a half-filled glass cup from which she sips at intervals*” (4), her “I sacrificed all I had to give you western education even at my own uttermost inconvenience?” (8) that she does hesitate to remind her children of, it is obvious things are unstable, falling apart so to speak. This point becomes apparent when Bomane tells her children, “No matter what an African woman has, if she does not have a peaceful marriage, she has got nothing.” While this
may be true, she complicates that notion when she adds, “An African woman is not an oyinbo woman. If everything does not distinguish us, marriage does. An oyinbo woman fights for her own freedom in the house. The African woman fights for the freedom of that home” (8); a “freedom” that she fights for by being both “oyibo” and an “African” woman at one and the same time? As it must be clear by now, in her mind (or is it Ogunfeyimi’s?), several forms of feminist ideologies collide, most especially Radical feminism, the type represented by Redstockings for example.

Founded by Ellen Willis and Shulamith Firestone in 1969, Redstockings’ sees resistance to female subordination as a fight against “male malfeasance.” This is apparent considering the group’s temperament in the early years of its formation, seen in its motto: “all men have oppressed [all] women.” Drawing from Marxist methodology to construct a theory of women’s oppression, the founders envisioned a “very militant, very public group” that was committed to action and raising consciousness about women oppression. The group sought to synthesize two existing socio-political traditions one of which was “the militant political tradition of radicals—the red of the revolution” (qtd in Echols,139). Starting from militancy against political reforms and laws which repelled abortion, the group eventually sought to abolish marriage altogether. While feminists like Pat Mainardi argued that male supremacy and sex roles within marriage were the problem and not marriage as an institution, Willis and Firestone insist that the opposite is the case. According to one of its founding members, Kathie Sarachild, “When male supremacy is completely eliminated, marriage, like the state, will disappear” (Echols, 46). Hence, rather than marriage being an institution that profits both men and women, Redstockings’ viewed it as a site to oppress women; although, in Bomane’s case and mind, something else takes control as we shall see.

As the example of the conversation I quoted above shows, while Bomane champions a feminist approach to challenge her world that she perceives to be male-dominated and hence traumatizes her, she also draws inspiration from Yoruba cultural precept to validate her standpoint. She is thus torn between two worlds: a radical feminist mentality that instigates a dialogue between biologically-determined and culturally-constructed behaviour that define gender roles, unfortunately, in the manner of Du Bois’ “double consciousness” and Ngugi’s “vacillating mentality”; and a cultural/Yoruba “feminist” ideology which, though recognizes that there are fundamental differences between the male and gender, also stresses the unique qualities of the female gender, as that aspect of the male gender required for both cosmological and social balance.6

6 For more discussion, see: Olajubu Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere, 2003.
Bomane seeks to redefine her position towards the female gender. She believes that the expression, “Women are weaker sex” is “a patriarchal dialect of prejudice and subjugation” (9), meant only “to veil men’s weakness” (14), and nurtured by the apparatus of culture and religion. Instead, she insists that her daughters should control their sexuality and stand by their choices when it comes to dating and marriage, that they should beware of men like their father who do “not have the winning spirit… the spirit that brings out something from nothing… the spirit that turns water into wine… the spirit that sees what is greater than manhood in female children” (8). While this is not entirely wrong, it is possible to interpret it as Bomane’s unconscious advocacy for a certain freedom due to her own sense of being “wildly unmothered” to use Adrienne Rich’s term (225), or what Rich also calls the “essential female tragedy” brought about by the “loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter” (237). As Rich explains, this feeling of apprehension is often borne out of the deprivation of mother’s love and acceptance due to the limits placed on such mothers by the society, and the fear of transferring that failure to one’s children.

Many daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, “whatever comes.” A mother’s victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman… The mother’s self-hatred and low expectations are the binding rags for the psyche of the daughter. (243)

Bomane’s disposition towards female sexuality after the failure of her marriage to a man who represents other African men, “the major problem most African men cannot overcome even as strong as they claim to be, is managing and raising female children to excellence” (8) as she claims, is possible to be borne out of such a feeling of failure that Rich explains and her own culpability in it. As she tells her daughters, “I passed through tortures: the pains of your father’s abandonment dominated my soul yet [I was] unable to subdue my love for him” (24). While she struggles to overcome her grief and her “very large craving for sex” (24), she wants her daughters to learn from her own mistakes.

Bomane’s daughters appear simple and innocent, yet complex, as are the issues raised in the play: the eldest, Adenike, a lawyer, demonstrates a sense of “shared trauma” with her mother hence is unable to fall in love with any man; Adenite’s sense of morality regarding relationship and sex is in contrast with Adenike’s. She has no qualms about dating Jude, her mother’s boyfriend and would not hesitate to accept his proposal of marriage; Tomi questions her mother’s “ploy” to find husbands for her daughters; the youngest, Tayo “Banturere
“buttocks” and Kemi “Gan ‘di oro” are as eager to learn about modern ways and explore their femininity as their grown-up sisters.7

In order to accomplish her task of re-education for her daughters, Bomane starts with the kitchen. She reinterprets the concept of “kitchen” as the place that best fits the woman. Instead of the kitchen being a tool to “define our boundary” as she argues, Bomane gives it agency as “the source of life, where food which gives life comes from and woman as the kitchen, the giver of life,” considering also that women are strong-willed creatures in the hands of whom the strongest gladiators in the world are mere tools (15-6). She condemns what she terms “I need a man to instruct me” (24) posture of some women, a position that informs some men’s feeling that women depend on them to survive. She believes that the feeling is often propelled by an imagination that is stimulated by sexual desire, a certain imagination that “drives your fingers to dialogue with your clitoris” (24), hence, her admonition of her daughters to objectify themselves in order to express their femininity. Echoing Helen Cixous’ “Your body is yours, take it!” she charges her daughters to “get what [they] want with what [they] have” (10), and to assert their freedom from male domination.

While projecting this radical feminist outlook, Bomane also draws from Yoruba cultural sensibility whenever she deems fit to buttress her point and validate her claims as the above conversation also underlines. Hence, in her home, Yoruba traditional precepts and radical feminism collide at will. For example, she disregards propriety towards sex and subjects dealing with sexuality by Yoruba tradition with regards to open discussion of sex among younger generations below puberty that is meant to guard against social misdemeanour. Ironically, this point is however well articulated by Adenike who tells her sister, Adenite, “Beauty attracts kisses but morality repels them” to which the latter, who is obviously more disposed to their mother’s counsel, replies “I think your ardent value for morality, overstretched, makes you this weak and blurs your view of existing and changing realities. Wake up, sister!” (21). Adenite’s concept of “reality” is obviously Bomane disregard for such cultural value that Adenike seems to venerate here.

Bomane openly discusses sex with her daughters and insists that they wear waist beads because “they fertilize hips and buttocks” (22). She wants to know when the girls lose their virginity, and tells them how often she has had sex after their father left (once in spite of her large craving for sex!). She wants them to control imagination which they need in order to control men’s which “extends their appetites beyond the requirement of survival” especially

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7 “Banturere buttocks” (heavy behind); “Gan ‘di oro” (flat behind).
because it is easily weakened by “the sight of breasts, laps, or even the shape of a woman” (25). In a chat with her boyfriend, Jude, whom she invites to her house and flirts with while her daughters peep through the curtain, and a conversation which recalls Koedt’s concern with “vaginal orgasm,” Bomane mentions that “the heart of a man is always weakened by the breasts of a woman” and that “when a woman wears a trouser she should ensure it does not bring out the shape of her vagina [because] most men’s eyes go straight to see how the vagina hops out in the trouser” (16). Bomane also tells her daughters that their father “did not have male semen in him” hence he “could not make his own semen produce male children [and] I gave him strong sex to produce my type” (9), but he failed to produce his to complement her own.

Bomane’s last statement underscores both the tension in her home and the contradictions in her radical feminist posture. Oyeronke Olajubu argues that “contemporary” women without the cultural sensibility that guides their perception and their cultures are strange bedfellows: while these women ignore traditional cultural values and prescriptions which they condemn and describe as archaic, they also seek fulfilment within the parameters of the same cultural system (Olajubu,40). While Bomane’s emphasis on the male child comes from the anguish of patriarchy in a society where the male child is supposedly more valued compared to the female as she earlier claims, she also resort to Yoruba cultural belief about mutual relations and success that comes from gender balance when explaining how conception works. This fact is explained in the Yoruba proverbs: “Otun we osi, osi we otun, lowo fii nmo” (Hands only become clean when they wash together); “Ajeje owo kan o gberu d’ori, ese kan o ro girigiri lona” (To lift a load to the head, one needs both hand; the ground is stampeded only with both feet); and “Ohun to ba ba oju, a ba ‘mu” (When the eyes shed tears, the nose also runs) which all underscore the epistemological imperative of the male/female principle and how it operates in the Yoruba society.

Assuming that Bomane has the right to condemn her own marriage due to her husband’s action, her insistence that her daughters should “be in control” of their marriage is clearly untenable, and constitutes another aspect of the contradiction in her new-found feminist philosophy. This is because contrary to Yoruba tradition which she recalls and utilizes when she deems necessary to do so, a woman is never required to take charge of her marriage but act as a supportive partner to her husband. The mutual consensus that is stipulated in marriage in a Yoruba traditional setting is expressed in the proverb, “A nf’otun teni, a nf’osi tu sokoto, obinrin ni a o ba oun gbo t’omo” (The right hand is used to prepare the bed, and the left hand is busy loosening the trouser; yet one’s wife complains of one’s unconcern with her barrenness) (Sheba,6). In a more elaborate way, Yoruba cultural attitude to sex/sexuality that negates Bomane’s conception of the clitoris and the way she wants her daughters to use it in controlling their marriage is highlighted in Odu Iwori-wonrin which reads:
M ba j’obinrin, ara kan ni mba dal/ Were I a woman, I would perform one feat

M ba to ‘leke titi lo de bebere idi/ I would display waist beads most alluringly

Mafì gbogbo ara hu irun titi lo de po-n-polo itan/ I would display fluffy skin hair right down onto my thighs

M ba b’oju w’abe wo, ma fe ‘rin sil/ I would behold my capitulating vagina with a smile

Ma ni iku dede n be l’abe asol/ And express ominous adoration for this unmistakable death under my clothing

Orisa ti kii je k’omo Okunrin o lee t’ojol/ That goddess that spells premature death for many a young man

D’ifa fun Gbogan-Iroko, tìi òse olobo o yere e yì ti nrele okol/ This was divined for Gbogan-Iroko, the excessively sexy woman/Who was getting set for her betrothal

Nje Gbogan-Iroko, a ri e r’ewa na o je ka ri e r’omo tuntun!! Now, Gbogan-Iroko, we know you are beautiful, but what about your fortune to rear babies! (qtd in Akintola,119-20).

Beyond the ethico-cultural value of procreation attached to sex other than as a weapon of control as the above Ifa verse underlines, a key aspect of marriage among the Yoruba which the above verse also draws attention to, are the danger in the misuse of the female genitalia and the ritual sensibility of the female genitalia through which people (a couple) forge a bond and share the belief that they are connected by something more concrete than the pleasure associated with copulation. Although Bomane expresses a recognition of the essentiality of marriage among the Yoruba, by asking her daughters to “control” their marriages, she clearly negates the value of marriage in an African cultural context; hence, the question remains: is controlling the marriage an assurance of “freedom” as she conceives it?

Moreover, the statement that I have used as introduction above also brings up at least two conceptual frame of reference which are central to my argument in this paper. On the one hand, the statement shows that Bomane recognizes her own “failure” or refusal to conform to the societal “unwritten” code wherein child-bearing becomes a tool to oppress women because they have given birth to only female children. Hence, she uses that knowledge, the same tool that “oppresses her” to overcome her disadvantaged position. In a Yoruba traditional setting as she explains quite correctly, “when a woman gives birth to a female child, it means she has fell her husband” (9); “fell” here, being a metaphor for the man’s failure to produce a male child and the wife’s supposed “victory” having given birth to her own gender type. While this is

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8 It goes without saying that numerous sexually transmitted diseases are some of the examples of the need to apply restraint in the (ab)use of the sexual organs.
understandable as a “lack” on the part of the male gender from a Yoruba cultural context, die-hard feminists would interpret only the expression not to mention its social application, as an evidence of patriarchy that perpetuates the devaluation of the female gender. Yet, we should also know that “fell” in this case is not so much of a notion to express even the joy of giving birth in the first instance, than it is about the value of the baby irrespective of her gender. In this case however, Bomane uses the sense of the cultural attitude towards male children in relation to the female, but twists the logic to advance the argument that, instead of being held responsible for producing only female children, her husband should be considered a failure for not producing male sperm that was required to fertilize her own “garden.”

Here, Bomane returns to the source in a Yoruba context: that both male and female energy is required for procreation. In Bourdieu’s terms, the “return to the source is the strategy per excellence […]”, the basis for all heretical subversion…, because it enables the insurgent to turn against the establishment the arms which they have used to justify their damnation” (Bourdieu, 84). Thus, by drawing strength from the same traditional values that she claims “frustrate us by defining our boundary and restricting our frontier” (15), Bomane also shows the contradiction in her radical feminist posture which seeks to legitimize itself through a cultural system that it seeks to dismantle. What Bomane does in that conversation, as Janet McCabe would explain it, is tantamount to a reproduction of modern gendered power relations in which female agency involves a continual but ambivalent struggle in resisting and reproducing entrenched patriarchal culture that, while oppressive, is necessary for personal success (McCabe, 154), irrespective of the temporal and/or spatial difference in their struggles.

On the other hand, at another level of perception which borders on a cosmic/spiritual interpretation, Bomane’s statement above translates to the “manifestation of aje” that derives from a woman’s recognition of certain features she possesses and are exclusive to her gender, one of which is the menstrual flow. As Teresa Washington explains, women use the menstrual flow, called “Asee” by the Yoruba, as a potent force to control both birth and death even as it functions as a significant aspect of motherhood that initiates men into fatherhood, “Awon Iya waa control reproductive organs and are bonded through the power of menstrual blood and the lives it promises” (Washington, 217). The mystical function of the menstrual flow also links itself to other feminine features such as the womb, “our mothers’ wombs are literal doorways to existence (15), including the kinesic communicative body-parts like the breast and kneeling posture usually depicted in Yoruba visual arts.

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9 I do not want to go into the debate on “Aje” and witch(es) or witchcraft here, but for a full discussion of same (including its literary exploration) see: Teresa Washington, Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Aje in Africana Literatures, 2005; Kimberly, Ann Wells, “Screaming, Flying, and Laughing: Magical Feminism’s Witches in Contemporary Film, Television, and Novels” PhD dissertation, Texas A &M University, 2007.
Unwittingly, Bomane draws attention to these aspects of Yoruba epistemological imperative in her anguish and effort to justify that she has been oppressed by her husband, if not by the male-centred society which fails to punish him for infidelity (and irresponsibility) to say the least. While she looks on one side, she projects her thought through another, as a result, she is unable to grasp the import of Adenike’s appeal to her “Mummy, you mean you can’t see the drift of events!? You mean you can’t read between lines!? Life seems to have its own meaning order than what we give to it” (32). Although Adenike makes this statement in the context of her own reality, her inability to love contrary to her mother’s perception about marriage even though she (Bomane) also claims that she is unable to love any man again after her husband’s infidelity, it does say a lot about the contradictions that her home waddles in.

Yet, in the words of Clifford Geertz, “culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behaviour patterns, but as a set of control mechanisms for the governing of behaviour” (98). Besides, as Okonda Okolo argues, “the cultural (historical) memory is ceaselessly renewed retroactively by new discoveries. Our past, by continually modifying itself through our discoveries, invites us to new appropriations, which lead us towards a better grasp of our identity” (qtd in Ajikobi,22). Such applies to the Yoruba culture and belief expressed in the concept of Right and Left, as a trustworthy knowledge of reality, that explains and warns—at the same time—about fundamental situations, the knowledge of which Bomane demonstrates but which she is either not sure of, or entirely confused about.10

While marriage becomes a vexed issue and weapon of ideological persuasion for Bomane, her contradictory statements highlight the epistemic philosophy that underlines the concept of gender and womanhood from a strictly feminist perspective but buried in Yoruba metaphysics. In a broader context, her conversations with her daughters as I have quoted also draw attention to the crisis of modernity and traditional values in most homes in Africa, where women make a recourse to feminism as a haven against perceived and actual acts which undermine their freedom and, at the same time, draw from the same system that they claim oppress them, in order to legitimise their own actions and positions in the same home and in the larger society.

Moreover, a more widespread effect of such Western notion of freedom to explore sexuality has given rise to immorality, clearly noticeable in young girls and adults’ mode of dressing. Young girls are today socialized into a culture that places little value on the female body, hence its exposure through the kind of dress that they wear. While this represents one of the most glaring effects of fashion on the society, it also speaks volume about the collapse of

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10 On Yoruba concept of Right and Left and its epistemic significance, see: Ajikobi The Concepts of Right and Left in Yoruba Socio-cultural Perspectives, 2013.
the family in contemporary society; albeit, families where virtue takes second place after the emphasis on gender equality and sexual freedom. Many marriages have collapsed today not so much because men are generally unfaithful to their wives, but more so because some women acting on the impulses of self-assertion and gender equality, have failed to grasp the essence of being partners to their husbands’ instead of controlling them. And, in situations where such men resist, their actions are misinterpreted as subjugation and authoritarianism.

In times past, it was a shameful thing for women to return to their natal homes due to break-up with their husbands’-- a practice the Yoruba refer to as ilemosu or dalemosu, however, single-motherhood is now a very “fashionable” practice, so is “Baby-Mama.” While these are not solely caused by feminist inclinations, they are not entirely unrelated. Cultural precepts are put in place by traditional societies in order to check such antisocial perpetrations and to impose sanity where necessary. While these hallowed traditions are disparaged and held up as obsolete, if not, backward practices, it is expected that their replacement should refine what they are lacking in knowledge. Uncritical embrace of foreign ideologies and social outlook such as feminism makes it imperative to draw attention to the Yoruba saying “Orisa bo o le gbe mi, se mi bo se bami” that is, if a god/deity cannot enhance my lot/station in life, it should rather let me/us be. In a society where morality and personal dignity seem to be lost, where women’s body and sexuality is consciously and constantly being “traded” on the altar of modernity/civilization, the future generation needs to be properly groomed. When the Yoruba also say, “T’omo ba dara, iya a ni ke beere lowo e” (When a child exhibits desirable conducts in the society, the credit goes to the mother) and vice-versa, it is a testimony to their philosophical and epistemological understanding of the crucial role that women play in the home and society at large: they never needed feminism to remind them of the female gender’s significant position, which has also defined their roles in the society, as clearly established by their culture.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have examined Leke Ogunfeyimi’s play, *Weaker Sex*, in the context of feminism and Yoruba cultural attitude towards the female gender in light of contemporary reality. I argued that through its protagonist, the play dramatizes the psychological conflict and social implication of contemporary feminist inclination as well as the burden of reconciling these two differing perception. I concluded that there is the urgent need to re-define our priorities regarding foreign ideologies in relation to traditions that we are quick to abandon without their critical understanding or social relevance.
Works Cited


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