

TRENDS IN WOMEN CENTRED ENGAGEMENTS IN THE WORKS OF SELECTED NIGERIAN PLAYWRIGHTS

Geraldine Ebele Ojukwu
&
Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh

<http://www.ajol.info/index.php/cajtm.v.15.1.6>

Abstract

Over the years, most Nigerian male writers rarely paint positive images of women in their fiction. Hence, the denigration of women not only in non-fictional Nigeria but also in Nigerian drama. . By way of reframing this narrative, Nigerian female playwrights flip the script of men's portrayal of women, thereby creating strong women characters, who not only oppose the oppressive patriarchal cultures, but in some cases have been engaged in wittingly or unwittingly oppressing their fellow women who are weaker, poorer, less-privileged or uneducated. This study thus seeks to examine the female gender representation in the works of some Female Nigerian playwrights such as; Zulu Sofola, Felicia Onyewadume, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Osita Ezenwanebe to see how they have presented issues of female empowerment in Nigeria. Data for the paper was generated using library research, and textual analyses of the qualitative research method. The study is premised on Molare Ogundipe's Stiwanism. An analyses of the qualitative data concludes that women have not yet attained emancipation. For that reason, the study concludes that Nigerian female playwrights should embody in their works, such narratives that can engage in improving women's mentality, to fast track emancipation.

Introduction

The study of man has always been the interest of man from time immemorial till present. Men from different parts of the world,

ancient or contemporary, have emerged as creative writers/ playwrights or dramatists who presents this interest of man. According to Emma Ejiofor Ebo, “drama has always been an integral part of man’s existence and like all other art forms, it is humanistic in nature and deals primarily with man, his behavior, nature, essence, ideas and life generally”(83).

Evidently, the excerpt above sees drama as part of mans experience. The importance or essence of drama between man and society cannot be overemphasized. This is further justified by John Vanbrugh, the Restoration Playwright in his “Preface” to *The Provoked Wife* thus “it is the intent and business of the stage to copy out the follies of the age to hold to every man a faithful glass and to show man of what species, he is an ass” (qtd in Alex Asigbo, 8). The playwright through this medium known as drama is not just a creative writer but a seer, critic and an inner eye or third eye of the society from which he emerges from. He watches, observes keenly and reechoes or keeps a record of that observed and experienced consciously and unconsciously through his work as a tool to affect and effect change in his environment. This is corroborated by Tracie Utoh in her paper titled “Dramatic Parables Imperatives for Social Change in Post Colonial Nigeria: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Plays” in *Matatu Journal of African Cultures, Visual Arts, and the Museum*, when she states that:

It is no coincidence that these plays which come in form of dramatic parables are created in tune with the happenings in the society and serve as platforms for articulating the yearnings and aspirations of the people and also as measures to combat oppressive forces with the aim of initiating lasting solutions. (274)

From the above it becomes clearly evident that playwrights are integral part of their society who imitates the life of the society by recording it in their work. Based on the forgoing this paper seeks to examine the female gender representation in the works of some

Nigerian playwrights such as; Zulu Sofola, Felicia Onyewadume, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Osita Ezenwanebe to see how they have presented issues of female empowerment in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This research is fore grounded in Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's STIWANISM. Ogundipe's Stiwanism is an African feminist theory from the stable of a woman activist. According to her "Stiwa" means social transformation including women of Africa". Accordingly she explains:

I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It is not about warring with men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest (2).

Stiwanism agrees with the argument in Africana Womanism that African women do not view men as their primary enemy but reject its assertion that "Africana men have never had the same... power to oppress white women" (Ogundipe-Leslie, "Stiwanism" 155). Continuing, in her work, "Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations," Ogundipe-Leslie describes the six mountains on the African woman's back, and man is one of them. She further states that "all over the world today... women are oppressed.....they have been owned, used and worked as horses, even today" ("Recreating Ourselves" 23). Olutayo agrees with the foregoing views in "Nigerian Female Playwrights," Olutayo decries the restriction placed on women's "participation in a number of activities considered as masculine, especially those that entail physical exertion because of the estimation of women as weaker vessels" (52). Relying on the views of Okeke Bozimo and

Aghoknor Okebukola, Olutayo aggregates the reasons affecting women participation in the sciences into four clusters namely: “community, home, school and individual” (33). Most critical are the communal factors which mainly deal with the roles the society imposes on women, which generally confine them to the home front to take care of the family’s domestic need. Therefore, any career that would threaten their effective discharge of these roles is considered unsuitable for women. However, Ogundipe realizes that for African society to get rid of all forms of oppression that some sort of negotiation is needed as radical formular of the western feminism has no place in African context.

In the context of this research, stiwanism is engaged to understand the works of Nigerian female playwrights from the ideology of African society.

Women Centred Engagements in the Works of Nigerian Playwrights

Play writing in Nigeria impressively came with the dawn of Colonialism or Western influence. What Africa had, before the colonial masters, was oral transmission of information from generation to generation. Bade Ajuwon, posits that,

Pre-literate Nigeria once enjoyed a verbal art civilization which, at its high point, was warmly patronized by traditional rulers and the general public. At a period when writing was unknown, the oral medium served the people as a bank for the preservation of their ancient experiences and beliefs. Much of the evidence that related to the past of Nigeria, therefore, could be found in oral traditions. (306)

Based on this, the colonizers took advantage of the situation, and declared that Africa had no history, and indeed no artistic productions. Nigerians, having gained the skills and acquired knowledge from the colonial masters, began to in literary and

creative writings in order to document existing knowledge in all spheres of human existence. Since then, playwriting, alongside other aspects of literature, has developed to dependent and dogmatic levels. In the light of this, many scholars have attempted to examine the developmental stages of literature by categorizing Nigerian playwrights according to generations. According to Ameh Dennis Akoh:

The first generation of early post-independence conventional playwrights, the post-civil war radical playwrights whose subject matter became the then running battle between capitalism and socialism and fronting for the latter in their ideological confrontations, the middle generation which emerged in the dying days of Marxism as praxis, and the new generation which are a product of the last days of military dictatorship in Nigeria and Africa. This last category has been christened the “new voices” in Nigerian drama (264).

Corroborating this view Alex Asigbo also categorized playwrights in his inaugural lecture, *Fighting from the Trenches: Nigerian Playwrights and the Task of Nation Building*, thus, “the early years, playwriting in the 70’s and 80’s(second generation) playwrights claiming to be more radical and committed to the enthronement of equality and social justice. Third generation Nigerian playwrights and the new voices” (14).

However, the need for assessment has also called for the assessment of the activities of Nigerian female playwrights over the years. Arguably, Nigerian male writers rarely paint strong images of women in their fictions. It appears that If they do not depict women as docile wives whose identities are recognized through their husbands; they make them (women) only gain identities through their status as mothers. Adewuji affirms the foregoing when he states that,

Among all Nigerians but to a large extent among rural, urban, poor, illiterate and non-illiterate ones, a woman, just like a little child, should only be seen and not heard. In fact, within the pervasive extended polygamous network, she is regarded as a little higher in esteem than household chattels (130).

Nnolim captures this lopsided image of women in African literature as depicted by writers such as Achebe and Soyinka as follows:

Right from the Edenic myth to modern times, women have been depicted as angels with feet of clay, as purveyors of unhappiness both for themselves and for their male counterparts. The image of women in African literature is a gloomy one, compounded by the unhelpful hand of tradition and patriarchy” (165).

Beyond Nigeria, similar images are common in the literature of other parts of Africa. El Sadawi asserts that:

Among the male authors I have read, both in the West and the Arab world; irrespective of the language in which they have written, or of the region from which they have come, not one has been able to free himself from this age-long image of women handed down to us from an ancient past, no matter how famous many of them have been in their passionate defense of human rights, human values and justices, and their vigorous resistance to oppression and tyranny in any form (520).

This is also the case with Nigerian playwrights. With the advent of colonialism and its attendant exaltation of men, the legal arrangement that had women accommodated in all spheres of life was disrupted. Bolanle Awe posits that in the pre-colonial period,

women were to be found in virtually “all spheres of human endeavour . . . they were active in agriculture . . . the field of politics and decision-making, they played a prominent role at the local level (314-315). With the integration of Nigeria in the global economy as an exporter of raw materials, new conceptions of the appropriate social roles of women prescribed by colonial administrators and missionaries changed the position of women in economic and therefore social endeavours. Men began to dominate the international market and confined women to subsistence farming for family upkeep. Furthermore, In “The Woman as Character in Nigerian Drama: A Discourse of Gender and Culture”, Yerima submits that certain myths, and folkloric pieces, which helped man to understand the wondrous things of nature and his entire environment, ascribed to him an air of superiority over woman; therefore, man is exalted as a higher creature over a woman in an ever-changing world. He states that:

While traditional African literature celebrates the domination of patriarchy, the female counterpart was included in most of the stories, as the docile wife, the prized gift or enticed stupid woman who was easily fooled by the attractive characteristics which were often attributed to the male characters within the environment, content and context of the drama (59-60).

Yerima further asserts that man is the author of the laws that christened him the master of woman and of the whole environment. In his analogy, even within the contextual materials found within folk stories and oral literature, woman is presented as a fellow protagonist, if not an appendage, to the hero. She was not central to the plot; she supplemented her male counterpart. All these have inspired the denigration of women not only in the non-fictitious Nigeria but also in Nigerian drama. It is therefore not surprising that

Nigerian feminists have hijacked the different genres of literature and performances to flip the script of men's portrayal of women, thereby creating strong women characters that unwittingly oppress their fellow women who are weaker, poorer, less-privileged or uneducated.

Hence, Utoh-Ezeajugh in her work titled "Nigerian Female Playwrights and the Evolution of a Literary Style: Gendered Discourse in the Plays of Tess Onwueme, Irene Salami-Agunloye and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh", differs in her line of argument by giving a broader view to the understanding of the works of female playwrights, by assessing only the developmental stages of Nigerian female writers into "three major standpoints and shifts in the predominant thematic preoccupation of women –centered drama.... namely; First, second and third (evolutionary stage)" (143).

Nigerian female playwrights include: Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Julie Okoh, Osonye Tess Onwueme, Zulu Sofola, Irene Isoken Salami, Stella Onyedepo, Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh, Onyeka Onyekuba, Felicia Onyewadume and Osita Ezenwanebe. The first generation of Nigerian female playwrights include Zulu Sofola who emerged to prominence in a male dominated domain, making great impact despite the shackles which faced her gender in the writing and theatrical arena; shackles which account for the initial dearth of literary output by women in Nigeria. According to Sofola; "...in the past traditional set up of Nigeria, men were educated at the expense of the women. Secondly, the women are more burdened with humdrum of daily life than men, and therefore it takes extra efforts on the part of the female to write..." (Olu Obafemi, 158).

Sofola's works include *The Disturbed Peace of Christmas* (1971), *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972), *King Emene* (1974), *The Wizard of Law* (1975), *The Sweet Trap* (1977), *Old Wines are Tasty* (1981) and *Memories in the Moonlight* (1986). Sofola in the early years of her writing was greatly influenced by the society of her time. There were not too many educated women, and cultural Institutions still

held sway in determining the fate of any woman who dared to overstep her boundaries. Thus, Sofola was propelled to write about those cultural institutions in the bid to expose such obnoxious cultural practices and patriarchal structures that have subdued women in a highly patriarchal society. Corroborating this view, Asigbo asserts that, “Sofola's playwriting scene in those early years, questioned some retrogressive cultural practices especially those that see women as commodities to be bought or sold according to the whims and caprices of the men folk” (19).

Sofola is important to the development of female playwriting in Nigeria. It is vital to note that she was the first woman to emerge straight from the shackles of obnoxious cultural practices and unchallenged male domination, to challenge such an organized oppressive structure. As much as her plays appear conformist in the context of present society, they were considered quite radical at the time she wrote. One can observe the development from her earlier concerns of tackling cultural practices that demeaned and objectified women; to her later works which portrayed the ordeals of educated female characters in the early years of women's attempts at liberation and empowerment. Utoh-Ezeajugh Observes that “in the later plays, including *The Showers*, *Lost Dreams* and *The Ivory Tower*, there is a woman-sensitive approach to her exploration of gender relations” (143). Sofola breaking of records in the history of dramatic literature paved way for other female writers to tread.

Another important figure in the first generation stage whose peculiar writing style ushered in the radical or second generation stage, was Tess Onwueme. She is also known as the “god mother of dramatic feminism” (Asigbo, 24) in Nigeria. Her works include: *A Hen too Soon* (1983), *The Dessert Encroachment* (1985), *Ban Empty Barn and Other Plays* (1986), *Legacies* (1989), *Tell it to Women* (1995), *Riot in Heaven* (1996), *Shakara: Dance hall Queen* (2000), *Then She Said It* (2003), *What Mama Said* (2004), *No Vacancy* (2005).

Just like Sofola, Onwueme wrote about culture and cultural practices in her early plays. Her earlier plays were concerned with the exposition of obnoxious cultural practices. As is buttressed in her play the *Broken Calabash*, we find women fighting to break free from obnoxious cultural practices holding them down. Significantly, her later works tilted to where female characters are revolting fiercely to the unjust restrictions placed on them by patriarchy. In Tess Onwueme's *Reign of Wazobia*, Wazobia, a regent king and strong female character, in her bid to enthrone a matriarchal reign, unknowingly becomes a new tyrant over members of her community. Donning traditionally masculine costumes and paraphernalia, she subdues the entire community and by extension her fellow women. The society of her time immensely shaped her writing into a radical one. This marked the beginning of a new type of writing or stage in the history of Nigerian female playwrights. Asigbo observes that "a major reason that shaped the writing of this period was the impunity with which the military ruled the country hence these writers tended to incite and conscientize the masses to be awake to their rights" (21).

Other remarkable female dramatists to emerge in the Nigerian writing scene, include Stella Onyedapo, Julie Okoh, Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh and Irene Isoken Salami. Influenced by Onwueme, their initial plays were in the light of radicalism. In Salami's *Sweet Revenge* and *More Than a Dancing*, women are positioned to challenge institutionalized political position of men in the society and to take over from them. In *More Than a Dancing*, women challenged the task of "dancing" as a cultural position marked out for women, and were able to take over the position held by men for ages. In Chima Utoh's *Our Wives has Gone Mad Again*, women are put in the reversal position of men, so as to show men that women are not incapacitated and that they too can do better. In *Nneora: An African Doll's House*, we encounter the character Nneora, who sacrifices all for her husband Ikenna, only to be scorned and rejected by him. This shocked her into self-

actualization and she strived to acquire education and economic empowerment which led her to freedom. In this light, Utoh-Ezeajugh observes that:

Nigerian female playwrights found themselves faced with the task of saving women from the debilitating trauma of life in a society based on conventions designed to ensure that women are socially, politically, economically, and culturally marginalized. The need to conscientise women, build up confidence in them, encourage them to assert themselves and aspire towards self actualization and higher socio cultural ideals has become urgent and paramount (145)

However, just like Onwueme departed from the theme of the early generation writers, Irene Isoken Salami, Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh, diverted to the theme that began to expose the women, to talk about the potentials of Nigerian women and their abilities and the fact that, if given the chance, they will do better. Osita Ezenwanebe is considered to be among the last of the emergent female playwrights. Important to note from the foregoing assessment of female gender representation in all these plays, is the presence of Intra -gender subjugation in the plays, where women are presented as oppressors of fellow women. This perhaps explains the different changes or variance in the presentation and representation of female characters in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, Felicia Onyewadume's *Clutches of Widowhood*, Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Who Owns this Coffin?*, Irene Isoken Salami's *Sweet Revenge*, and Osita Ezenwanebe's *Egg without Yolk*. In the light of this study one would place Zulu Sofola as first generation playwright, Felicia Onyewadume as second generation playwright, Irene Isoken Salami and Tracie Chima Utoh as third generation playwrights. In this regard Utoh-Ezeajugh asserts that:

The ideology of the first stage in the evolution of female playwrights, is an engagement with tradition and the quest by women playwrights to dismantle oppressive cultural

structures... The second stage in the development of women's playwriting witnessed a shift from condemnations of the old order to the exposition of oppressive machineries inherent in modern patriarchal society...the instruments of subjugation can no longer be traditional but have rather put on garbs of modern institution... the third stage seeks to transform the status of women through conscientisation and empowerment. Women's drama of this evolutionary stage can be tagged the drama of social transformation, political awareness, cultural emancipation and economic empowerment" (145).

Sofola in *Wedlock of the God's*, presents female characters in a patriarchal society in which the rules and norms established by men are strongly upheld by the society and women are not expected to say much or be heard. Thus Odibie, Nneka, Ogoli, and Anwasia represent African women whose minds have been captured by their predators/oppressors. As cultural agents they adhere to, ensure and enforce obnoxious cultural practices against their fellow women who dare go contrary to their established laws. Sofola creates the female character Ogwoma to represent women who are strong willed in the clamor for liberation from obnoxious customs and acts; the enlightened African woman who dares to speak, as is substantiated by Udo:

Udo: All of us have known Ogwoma from the very day she was born; we know that she is very strong-willed. Many of us have often wondered why she did not become a man (Sofola, 26).

Other female characters such as Odibei, Nneka, Ogoli and Anwasia are presented as traditional custodians/ militants who would not want anyone to speak or go against their tradition. They are therefore very sensitive to any voice of opposition and they try to punish/crush severely those who dare to oppose them. Sofola as a lone fighter seems to have hidden under the character of Ogwoma

to speak against such oppressive measures carried out against women in her patriarchal society.

Felicia Onyewadume, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Osita Ezenwanebe followed the trail of their predecessor Zulu Sofola. They too, in their plays present women who are ardent adherents to the old traditional dictum; but differ from Sofola by presenting female characters/women who also reject this old norm. It therefore goes without saying, that as time went by, women began to explore the terrains of freedom presented by education and enlightenment. Ogwoma in *Wedlock of the God's* represents a cross-section of Nigerian women, who are violent in their search/quest for freedom, while the female characters in Utoh's *Who owns this Coffin?*, Onyewadume's *Clutches of Widowhood*, Ezenwanebe's *Egg without Yolk*, Salami's *Sweet Revenge* are non confrontational in their approaches, rather, they go about their quest for freedom in a subtle manner.

Sofola presented empowered women in tandem with the society which she represented while other playwrights presented female characters that are empowered according to the dictates of the times or in the words of Utoh-Ezeajugh, they reflected "the drama/society of social transformation, political awareness, cultural emancipation and economic empowerment"(147) of the time in which the play was written. In some of their portrayals, the playwrights used their female characters to represent women in the society who have attained great heights, but instead of helping fellow women, present themselves as worse than men. Utoh refers to them as "militant liberationist who speaks only for themselves rather than the silent majority" (7).

Onyewadume, Sofola, Utoh-Ezeajugh and Ezenwanebe thus, present female characters that are united in carrying out outrageous norms rather than being united in uplifting fellow women. They also tend to concentrate and list out the issues and causes of women subjugation rather than proffering solutions to them. On the other hand, others such as Salami present female

characters who uplift their fellow women to greater heights, by presenting female bonding as a practical way of attaining women empowerment. However, all the playwrights tend to have female character protagonists that make brave and good choices. They demonstrate how it is their choices rather than their abilities that actually show who they are.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Plays have a way of influencing and shaping the way people perceive and resolve dialogue or actions. Such thematic issues like gender equality, women representation in 21st century society, intra-gender subjugation, and so on, have been on the fore front of contemporary women playwrights. These female playwrights through their creative works reflect on the issues that are critical to women empowerment and womanhood, and as such, provide sustainable solutions that address the obnoxious treatment which women receive even from fellow women. Consequently Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the God's*, Osita Ezenwanebe's *Egg without Yolk*, Felicia Onyewadume's *Clutches of Widowhood*, Tracie Chima Utoh's *Who Own's this Coffin?*, and Irene Isoken Salami's *Sweet Revenge* support this claim.

In the many works of Nigerian female playwrights, the researchers discovered a dedicated representation of intersections that attempt to hinder women from achieving their desired goals of emancipation from traditional and cultural shackles and other pathological antecedents. Hence, Utoh-Ezeajugh observes that "the fruit of the efforts of women playwrights to empower their gender in Africa should be the total emancipation of women" (148). Nigerian female playwrights should embody in their works, such narratives that can engage in improving women's emancipation from patriarchal structures and from intra-gender subjugation.

Works Cited

- Akoh, Dennis Ameh. "The Constraints and Prospects of Post Military Literary Engagement in Nigeria". 2009. <<http://www.nobleworld.biz/images/Akoh.pdf>.> Accessed 30th August, 2018.
- Bade, Ajuwon. *Oral and Written Literature in Nigeria: Nigerian History and Culture*. Richard Olaniyan (Ed). Hong Kong: Longman Group Ltd, 1985: 306-318.
- Emmanuel, Ejiofor Ebo. "The Playwright and Socio-political Commitment in a Post Colonial State: Esiaba Irobi's Nwokedi as a paradigm". *Imsu Theatre Journal: A contemporary journal of Arts and Theatre Practice*. Canice Chukwu Nwosu and Emeka Nwosu (eds) Owerri: Imo State University 2012.
- Ezenwanebe, Osita Catherine. *Egg Without Yolk*. Lagos: University of Lagos Press and Bookshop Ltd, 2015.
- Nnolim, Charles. "African Feminism: The Scandalous Path." *Beyond the Marginal Land: Gender Perspectives in African Writing*. Ed. Chioma Opara. Port Harcourt: Belpot, 1999. 51-63.
- Olutayo, Ade. "Nigerian Female Playwrights." 7 Feb. 2006. <http://www.usercontent.histrionic-of-nigerianfeminism.ng>. accessed 15 Feb. 2019.
- Ogundipe-Leslie, Molar. *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*. Trenton N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994. Print.
- _____. "Stiwanism: Feminism in an African Context." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. USA: Blackwell, 2007. 542-550.

Onyewadume, Felicia. *Echoes of Hard Times and Other Plays*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1996.

Sofola, Zulu. *Wedlock of the Gods*. Ibadan: Evans, 1972.

Utoh, Tracie Chima. "Dramatic Parables Imperatives for Social Change in Post Colonial Nigeria: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Plays" in *Matatu Journal of African Cultures, Visual Arts, and the Museum: Sights/Sites of Creativity and Conflict*. Nos 25 – 26, Amsterdam – New York: Editions Rodopi, (2002): 273 – 281.

Utoh-Ezeajugh, Tracie Chima. *Who Owns This Coffin? And Other Plays*. Jos: Sweetop, 1999.

Saadawi, El Nawal. "The Heroine in Arab Literature." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. USA: Blackwell, 2007.

Yerima, Ahmed. "The Woman as Character in Nigerian Drama: A Discourse of Gender and Culture". *Trends in the Theory and Practice of Theatre in Nigeria*. Duro Oni and Ahmed Yerima. (Eds). Lagos: Society of Nigerian Theatre Artistes (SOWTA), (2008): 59-75.

AUTHOR'S NAMES AND ADDRESSES

Geraldine Ebele Ojukwu

Department of Theatre and Film Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka
ebygeraldojukwu@gmail.com

&

Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh, PhD

Professor of Theatre and Film Design
Department of Theatre and Film Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka Nigeria.
t.utoh-ezeajugh@unizik.edu.ng