

Tenor of Humanism Re-reading Feminity in the Drama of Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh

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Abstract

The first time I read Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Forest of Palm Trees*, as well as, her other works, I became attracted to the tenor of temperance that she applies to her treatment of the Woman issue. Throughout her dramatic opus, Utoh-Ezeajugh exhibits a profound proclivity towards the reiteration of humanist agitation (rather than feminist) which aims at re-channelling literary emphasis to more debilitating phenomena in contemporary society other than the re-inscription of gendered disputations. Hence, her *Cauldron of Death* treats the issue of HIV/AIDS, *Forest of Palm Trees* treats that of the vexing issue of revenue/derivation sharing formula in Nigeria, while in her *Nneora, an African Doll's House* she re-works Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and makes her Nora (Nneora—mother of all) to remain in her husband's house after their quarrel so that both of them can jointly tackle other far more oppressive forces in both their family and society. I wish to posit in this essay that Utoh-Ezeajugh's social consciousness as a writer holds gargantuan relevance for the unification of both men and women in the fight against global malaise such as hunger/poverty/famine, HIV/AIDS, human trafficking, wars, promiscuity, and other sundry problems. This unity has become extremely relevant because the quest for better living condition for all humanity is one that essentially involves men and women. This paper is not geared towards suppressing instances of gendered

oppressive tendencies in contemporary living, but is aimed at buttressing the need for multilateral tackling of issues as Utoh-Ezeajugh's dramatic oeuvre portends.

Introduction

The Igbo have an adage: *onye x1q ya na-agba qkx anagh[achx oke* (One whose house is on fire, does not pursue rats/rodents that run out from the conflagration). This saying is being used here to look at the inherent folly of dissipating energy on issues that are relatively benign when compared to the malignant ones that are threatening to consume one's existence. Given the harshness of our continent's terrain—the violence of our politics, our stifling economy(ies), our comatose infrastructure, our moribund industries which ensure that our teeming highly employable labour roams the streets, our quarantined indigenous technology, the insincerity of our leaders, the unwholesome annihilation of our identity by the homogenising tendencies of Western imperialism in the name of globalisation, and our high mortality rate—which all culminate in astounding deprivations: can the truly committed African artist of today afford the luxury of wanton stage business when the theatre, in a manner of saying, is on fire? Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh, through her dramatic works, has shown that amidst the proliferation of variegated strands of feminist postulations, female writers can still resist the temptation of viewing society solely through the periscope designed, manufactured, assembled, and patented by feminism. This paper, nonetheless, intends to present a female voice in drama in contemporary Africa that tends to see that Africans and may be, the rest of humanity, must survive the present realities of hunger, HIV/AIDS pandemic, wars and other misanthropic phenomena, before they can indulge in the luxury of gendered disputations.

The postmodern rendition of "gender" has more or less stripped it of its denotative value as a signifier for male and female. It has, thus, begun to almost solely denote "femaleness." This is how far the budding Women Issue of the late nineteenth century has metamorphosed in this twenty first century. A feminist, therefore, has come to be known as "someone who supports the idea that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men" (*Longman* 512). To Amina Mama, feminism is "a positive, movement-based term ... [that] signals a refusal of oppression and a commitment to struggling for women's liberation ..." [Salo par. 5; my emphasis]. Jill Dolan adds that, the movement works in an individual as a consciousness that begins with in "a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, political and intellectual discourse" (3). Another important definition of feminism is that of Mabel Tobrise, who views it as "a *protestant ideology* opposed to the hemlining of women, but desirous of their emancipation in all spheres of life" (1; my emphasis).

The coming of feminism, no doubt, encouraged the emergence of female writers. In Africa, the likes of 'Zulu Sofola, Ama Ata Aidoo and a host of others, emerged in dramatic writings to re-write the woman back into positivity after the unwholesome portraiture they received at the hands of the early male writers. Mabel Tobrise affirms this in the statement that these women writers emerged to

Erase the namby pamby women from their drama by elevating the female characters' consciousness and tempering their portrayal with some ideology, power and radicalism ... (1)

This statement leaves a sour taste in the mouth when one ponders what or who this heavy artillery of warfare—the tripartite, ideology, power and radicalism—would be aimed at,

or has been aimed at. It is obvious that they are not weapons amassed for the eradication of hunger/poverty in Africa, nor are they poised to tackle desert encroachment, HIV/AIDS pandemic, oppressive governments and other dehumanising tendencies that have become the accoutrements of contemporary African living. The French feminist theorist, Hélène Cixous, seems to give the extent to which this arsenal being amassed by women will go, in her theorisation of *écriture féminine*. Here she posits that women should “write/right” themselves back into relevance through “a bursting, a violent breaking up of the symbolic order/language which has denied women their ‘voice’, their identity” (Cixous & Clement 93). And the question arises again, who will be the victims of this “bursting” and this “violent breaking up” be.

As if Cixous’s is not enough, her fellow compatriot, Luce Irigaray theorised that the woman would re-make herself through “a return to the (sexual) pleasures of the body” (Aston 50). According to her, “a woman touches herself by and within herself directly ... [because] her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually meaning that by the morphology of her sex, “she is already two—but not divisible into ones—who stimulate each other” (Irigaray 100). In more precise terms, Irigaray contends that the woman should explore her natural binarism so as to break free from the man. One, however, observes here that this is an offensive weapon to be employed by women against men, since Irigaray posits that whereas the woman can easily explore her sexuality by herself, the man needs “an instrument in order to touch himself (sexually): his hands, woman’s genitals and language” (Aston 50). These positions, which are presented as constituents of the tripartite, gender war arsenal—ideology, power and radicalism—being acquired by women is not to wage war to fight hunger but against their fellow human beings—men. These measures are

expected in a feminist sense, to be the comeuppance for men (chauvinists) for millennia of subjugating womanity and trivialising femininity.

Before looking at the works of Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh, let us look briefly at the dramatic opus of a contemporary British female writer, Caryl Churchill. Churchill’s *The Striker* (1994) has been described as “a play about irrationality” filled with “goblins, hags and ghosts from the world of British legends and fairytales ...” (Stoll par. 64). The striking aspect of Churchill’s *The Striker* is the “nonsensical” language that she uses in the name of the dissolution of language and meaning under the Western theories that gave birth to postmodernism. Let us read the sentences of Churchill’s *The Striker*:

Heard her boast beast a roast beef eater,
daughter could spin span spick and spun the
lowest form of wheat straw into gold, raw into
roar, golden lion and lyonesse under the sea,
dungeoness under the castle for bad mad sad
adders and takers away. (qtd in Stoll par. 64)

The issue here is that Churchill has compromised meaning in the name of radicalism. Peopling her play with goblins and other unreal characters is not unethical because even our own Wole Soyinka at one time, was very fascinated with surreal personas of his Yoruba society. Thank goodness that his post-*Opera Wonyosi* (1977) plays are more realistic and at the same time satiric in capturing the tenor of deprivation that living in the contemporary African societies entails. Consequently, it would have been easier for the newer female voices of Africa to take the easy way out by delving into abstraction in the name of radicalism. The Igbo adage which says: *Oke soro ngwere maa mmiri, q kq q ngwere, q gagh[akq oke* (if the rat enters water with the lizard, when the lizard’s body dries up, the rat’s will

still be wet) holds a lot of meaning for them, especially Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh whose plays' dramatic themes interest us in this.

By implication, Churchill's Britain may not have the personas of Utoh's *Who Owns This Coffin?* (1999) in the top echelon of their feminist movement. Madam Ekwutosi and others are single mothers who have systematically removed their spouses from their lives, in order to pursue their "dreams." Finally, it is revealed that they are base, full of vice and selfish. With this play, Utoh takes a swipe at the feminist agitation that is bereft of honesty and morality. The play commences with a rehash of extant feminist slogans (*Who Owns...* 15), setting the stage for the Narrator to come up and extol the merits of the Women Liberation movement. However the satiric tone of the play is set by the Narrator's comment after eulogising feminism:

It ... [is] disheartening to observe cracks on the wall of the women's movement, long before major huddles (sic) have been crossed and set goals accomplished... some... observers... ask in perplexity; 'Do some militant liberationists speak only for themselves or for the silent majority too?'. (Utoh *Who Owns...* 17)

The preceding is typical of Utoh-Ezeajugh, especially with regard to feminism in its radical form. This may have prompted Femi Osofisan to assert that "Chima is a playwright who will not shy away from reality, however painful, and who is not afraid to challenge conventional wisdom, however controversial that may be," (Utoh *Who Owns...* 9). This fact is further treated in her next play, *The Night of a Thousand Truths*. As the name implies, the play is set on a particular night that a particular nuclear family comes to terms with the reality of the immorality of its members. On that night, all pretences are dropped as

both parents and the children become aware of each other's hidden sins and crimes. It is, however, instructive that Utoh absolves Mummy—the mother and wife, of any culpability whatsoever. But the daughter, Candy, is as vile as they come.

The interesting part of this play with close relevance to our discourse is the conclusion, where Utoh contrives a peaceful re-union of the entire family members. It would have been more contemporaneous to make the family disperse in conflict. But Utoh gives a promise of a better future for them all, after that horrible "night of a thousand truths"¹. Daddy's closing remarks, points to the tenor of "humanity" other than that of gendered polarisation of family and society, in Utoh-Ezeajugh's dramatic canon. He says:

We are a family. We need each other. We cannot do without each other. From now on, we must borrow from our collective strength ... We must acknowledge individual weakness ... After the rain comes the bright sun ... Now we are all free to start again. (Utoh *Who Owns...* 109-110)

This re-unification makes for a peaceful co-existence for humanity irrespective of sex. Utoh-Ezeajugh's next play *Forest of Palm Trees*, presents a community called Ighayo, which resembles contemporary Nigeria to a large extent. The contention for the control of the resources of the palm tree plantation prevents this community from coming together to honour one of her illustrious sons, who won a gold medal at the Olympic Games. Furthermore, it is revealed that there has been an almost interminable contest for the headship of the community along tribal lines. At the end, however, prospects of better future is given with the promise of rotational headship by Yallabai, the incumbent, and the promise of equitable distribution of the proceeds of the palm tree plantation which

the entire Ighayo citizenry owns. Subsequently, in these first three plays one can deduce that Utoh-Ezeajugh's self assigned brief as a dramatist is not just to create another feminist voice to re-inscribe femininity, but a conscious attempt to look at the malaise of the society, especially that of Africa with a view to pointing the way forward. She seems to understand that for a society that over seventy percent of its population is poor, she can not afford to engage in sexist disputations amidst such a depravity. Churchill, for instance, can afford being obscurantist or playing with meaning and language because of the kind of society she represents, but that is obviously too costly for a committed African artist of today, both male and female.

Amina Mama, a Nigerian feminist who is based in South Africa, concedes the superior devastation of African deprivations to other contending misnomers by positing that,

... poverty is probably the worst threat to integrity and security world wide. *It is a threat that cannot be adequately addressed through the cultural lip-service strategy of recognition and celebration, because poverty, and its offspring, insecurity and loss of integrity, are all matters of global and political economy, matters that demand redistribution and justice.* (par. 9; *emphases in the original*)

Even though Mama is speaking for feminism here, she fails to acknowledge the fact that so long as the distribution of resources on the continent does not mean that all men are rich while all women are hungry, the need for concerted efforts through a trans-gender offensive against hunger, for instance, can never be obliterated by the call for the replication of the tenets of radical feminism on the African continent. This is

because a hungry man or woman knows no ideology other than that of food and wealth acquisition.

With this thought in mind, Utoh-Ezeajugh titles her next play, *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*². Here, the dramatist goes further with the tirade of exposing the underside of some proponents of feminism as she commenced in her first play, *Who Owns this Coffin?* In this fourth play, Utoh projects into the future to give a view of the post-feminist African society—when the women must have taken over all positions of authority. The female personas of this drama—Irene, Funmi, Mairo—eventually show themselves to be as vile as the men they took over from. The spate of electoral fraud, bribery of security operatives, infidelity in marriage and even marital violence, as is seen when Ife?ma hits her husband—Zeus, with a pestle³ (Utoh *Our Wives...* 59-58), has not abated under the rule of women in both family and society. Rather than become performative, the women of this play keep the eyes of their followers (who are mainly women) riveted on gendered polarity rather than on the other equally (if not more) oppressive dichotomies of class, race or economy. This play, however, ends without any conclusion whatsoever, since the women go unpunished. This inconclusiveness is a dramatic technique that reflects Utoh-Ezeajugh's belief that social vices would remain interminable in our African society (ies), if we continue to chase shadows especially when the substance is as life-threatening as hunger and its correlation in our world.

The point being made here is not that feminism is entirely evil. Feminism is, no doubt good because it has to a large extent modified the earlier negative portraiture of femininity in literature, for instance, and has aided the promotion of women rights and participation in society. The argument here, however, is contained in Chandra Mohanty's observation which is that the works of feminists are "inscribed within relation of power"

that puts the Western-spurn feminism and its mutations on its (un)willing recipients on the African continent at opposite ends of a spectrum (3). As such, some of the postulations of feminism as practiced in the West are incompatible with the reality of our African experience. As the Igbo would say: *a na-ebu xzq zqta ala tupu azqba ute* (one gets the space first before going to contend for mat). In other words, we need to survive as humans first before going into this inter-gender fight for supremacy. This may have informed Utoh-Ezeajugh's ridicule of female solidarity in *Everyday is for the Thief* where Oby and Amaka overreach themselves in the attempted murder of their promiscuous lover, Chudi. Both discover to their chagrin, that Chudi has been using them, as well as, other girls. Amaka becomes wiser, in that rather than turn on themselves, she convinces Oby to join forces with her against Chudi. In the end, however, it is the girls that take to their heels when Chudi is dealt a fatal blow by Oby (Utoh *Our Wives...* 111).

The next play, *Cauldron of Death*, treats the issue of HIV/AIDS pandemic and its ravaging effect on humanity. Here a family, in the manner of *The Night...* discovers that it is not only the son who is dying in bed from AIDS infection, but also the entire family that is infected. Ikem, the father, got it through promiscuous living, Ozoemena, the daughter got it through a blood transfusion carried out carelessly by a doctor who failed to screen Junior's blood while their mother got it from their father. As these revelations are being made, Nneqma, the mother is left with all the emotional pains⁴. One interesting aspect of this play, nonetheless, is that in spite of the revelation of the promiscuity of the men in the family, Nneqma maintains the unity of the family by seeing the disease as the enemy and not the men. She cries out at the peak of her son's travails:

NNEQMA: (begins to cry helplessly) This is not true. Somebody should tell me this not

true ... We are all healthy. We are free and safe from this heartless monster. This is all a horrible nightmare from which I will wake up to the reality of a blissful tomorrow... (Utoh *Our Wives...* 150)

The position of Nneqma in this play leads us to the mother-figure metaphor, which Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh extols greatly in her works. Positive mother-personas include Mummy in *The Night of a Thousand Truths*, Mama Champion in *Forest of Palm Trees*, and Nneqma in *Cauldron of Death*. The names given to these women reflect their characteristics as mothers, good mothers who do not see humanity from the divisive feminist standpoint, but from the point of being able to separate the chaff from the grain. "Nneqma" means "good mother" and it is from this name that Utoh-Ezeajugh graduates to "Nneqra" in her adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* which she titled, *Nneqra: an African Doll's House*⁵.

In this newest play, Utoh-Ezeajugh makes her own Nora whom she re-names "Nneqra" (mother of all) to remain in the house with her husband after their travails. *Nneqra* has been described as "a study of the virtues of womanhood" (Asigbo 269). It is further observed that in this play, Utoh-Ezeajugh "appears to be calling on women not to forget their feminine virtues, but to see themselves as mothers of the world ..." (Asigbo 269). Even though "motherhood" has been roundly condemned by some women as a romanticising of womanity, which stagnates the women and not the men (Ogundipe-Leslie 50), but Utoh-Ezeajugh finds in motherhood, a healing balm for humanity. Rather than buttressing sexist differences, artists (especially female writers) should turn up the faucet of unity against other debilitating forces that stare African humanity in

the face. Carolyn Kumah identifies one of the inefficiencies of Western feminism as the neglect of the common interest of the African peoples, which is, the total liberation of its land and peoples (5). Amina Mama puts the condition of the African more succinctly, thus

Postcolonial thinkers challenge the hegemony of the colonial regime, and the coercive manner, in which it has produced us as subject peoples, reduced, simplified and embedded us in dubiously defined nativist notion of custom and creed, notion so thoroughly imbued with insecurity and mistrust, that they manifest in spasms of internecine enmity and hatred. (par. 11)

This statement takes us back to where we took off from: one whose house is on fire does not pursue rats. This is what Utoh-Ezeajugh has discovered, in that rather than jump on to the bandwagon of Western feminism as another feminist writer on the block, she has honed her theatrical tools and immersed herself in the onerous task of cleansing the “Aegean stables” of humanity (not only feminism’s) for a better and a brighter future of peaceful co-existence⁶.

Let me close by stating that Utoh-Ezeajugh is not alone in this race. Earlier African female writers like Aminata Sow Fall, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, and Mariama Bâ, at one time or the other, denied being feminists (Kolawole 10). Buchi Emecheta, on her part, maintains that she writes about the realities of her society and that in doing that, she did not know that people would call her a feminist. She then concludes that if she will take the rubric, she is “a feminist with a small f” (Nfah-Abbenyi 9). These women writers’ comments have shown that Western feminism should be applied with caution on our continent. This is what Utoh-Ezeajugh has done. She

would have aped Caryl Churchill, for instance, but the realities of her Nigerian society do not in any way equal the luxury of Churchill’s England. As such, she has chosen to fight the fire that has engulfed our house thereby forfeiting the rats that are escaping from the inferno, through her commitment to treating the issues of her society. This is the tenor of humanism not that of feminism.

NOTES

1. Utoh is the last name she used in her first two plays; *Nneora* bears the name Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh.
2. This play is not an adaptation of Ola Rotimi’s *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*.
3. I used the more appropriate *Ifeqma* (good thing) other than *Ifeoma*; in Igbo letters “o” and “q” are different vowels.
4. I have used the more appropriate *Nneqma* (good mother) other than *Nneqma*.
5. I also prefer to use *Nneqra* (mother of all) other than Utoh-Ezeajugh’s *Nneqra*.
6. Alex Asigbo considers her offensive on the charlatanism of some feminists on the continent as an attempt to cleanse it of bad eggs for a more honest and united attack on the male gender. I think that this effort of Utoh-Ezeajugh’s is geared towards the renewal of human unity along gender lines.

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