

**WOMEN AND WIVES' REVOLT IN
NIGERIAN FEMINIST DRAMA
A TEXTUAL GRILLING OF
IRENE SALAMI'S SWEET REVENGE**

Benedict Binebai (Ph.D)

*Niger Delta University
Wilberforce Island*

Abstract

This article examines the contributions of female dramatists to research in contemporary African drama. The article engages with the issues that continue to rejuvenate the women's ideology and movement today. The emancipation of women under the patriarchy, women's empowerment, women's clamour for new identity and solidarity in the face of male dominance strongly embody these issues. The paper places emphasis on these themes that have been a source of inspiration to feminist drama and dramatist and have also influenced scholarship on feminism. The paper exploits the justification of the wives and women's revolt, and also looks at ideological persuasion in the revolt. It concludes that the dramatist advocates a new identity for African women in their relationship with their men and further advocates radical feminism in Africa.

Keywords: feminist drama, feminism, revolt, patriarchy, dominance

The panorama of feminism

The incapability of liberal democracies to realise anything

more than a little addition in power configurations for members of marginalised social groups gives rise to social groups' including women's advocacy all over the world. One fundamental manifestation of the women's movement is that it has found a place in society and in literature. Whether radical or material feminism, whether difference or essentialist feminism, or victim feminism, what is central to the women's revolutionary struggle is that they are oppressed in a world dominated by the patriarchy. "Feminist consciousness is the awareness of the social and cultural oppression of women and their consequent struggle for liberation (Ezewanebe, 2006:3). Feminism takes up the task of articulating what women understand of themselves (and of men) without reducing femininity to biological hegemony; and this situates women as oppressed under the patriarchy. Lesbian female separatists argue that the central mechanism for oppression of women under the patriarchy is homosexuality. Fryre argued that women's relationships with men are persistently characterized by domination. They then reasoned that only divorce and the creation of new geographic and political communities of women would end patriarchal exploitation and forge a liberatory female identity (1983: 175) Radical feminists consider very strongly women's oppression by male dominance as the basic force of identity politics. The women's feminist vision comes under attack in Shielamith Firestones book *The Dialectic of Sex* where the point is made that "racism is sexism extended. The black woman's participation in the fight against racism with their male black is an obvious division and a major blow to the validity of the

feminist identity politics which is against the patriarchy (1970: 103&20). Viewed from the lens of philosophical and ideological positions, feminists claim to oppression of women by men and their struggle for personality steeped in the idea of shared experience seems to have become a very fundamental subject for both creative writing and scholarship. Feminist movement as a social group insists on alliance, support and coordination to put collectively a mass movement for social transformation with deep emphasis on internal group harmony and individual self value.

Some African dramatists have written plays in which women unite to secure their freedom. Mention can be made of *The Wives' Revolt* by JP Clark; *Our Husband has gone mad Again*, *Rebellion of the Bumpy Chested* by Stella Oyedepo, *Mulkin Matta* by Harghar, *Beyond Nightmare* by Ben Binebai and *Dance on his Grave* by Barclays Ayakoroma. But in some play texts written by women, women seem to be divided. Julie Okoh's *Edewede*, *Mask*, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. This points to the fact that the women's house of feminism is a divided one. Along this line of argument is that cases abound in Africa where women make incursion into another woman's marital home. If women are one in the politics of femininity, how do we explain a situation where women commit adultery or fornication with the lawfully wedded husband of their fellow woman? Obviously, women's solidarity in the imaginative world of drama is more effective than in true life situation where women morally defeat the essence of such camaraderie. Nnaemeka Obioma in *The politics of Mothering* observes:

The fact in many African societies, women act as

oppressive agents to other women especially as co-wives, mother in-laws, older women and step mothers. This is often the outcome of institutionalized, hierarchical female spaces that make women victims and collaborators in patriarchal violence (1997).

In the literary landscape of Africa and Nigeria in particular, female writers have also established in their works the issue of women's conspiracy and social Darwinism against their fellow women as observed above. Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods* dramatizes women's wickedness against women as Odibie kills Oguoma to avenge the death of her son. In Julie Okoh's *Edewede*, we find the older women strongly opposed to Edewede's move to eradicate female circumcision. (Irene Salami cited in *After the Nobel Prize...* (2006:139). There is no gain saying the fact that the questions of the preservation of harmful traditional beliefs and practices and resistance and change between the older women and the younger woman have come to puncture the solidarity needed by the feminist identity politics. Within the feminist movement, women are accused of being their own enemies. Female disunity is highlighted as one of the women's movement (Evwierhoma 2000:151). This disunity receives the indictment of Tess Onwueme in her drama *Go Tell it to Women* (1992) where the character Okei laments the disunity among women: Women! Now you do not fight for equality but for the extermination of every other including your fellow woman!!! (p.184). There is therefore no doubt that women's identity struggle is in crisis. In *After the Nobel Prize: A Reflection on African Literature*,

Governance and Development Irene Salami expresses the view that the Nigerian dramatic literary tradition has been able to uncover gaps and silences, expose biases and prejudices, by initiating dialogue on gender. The Nigerian women dramatists have been able to set in motion change in the Nigeria Literature. Their writings challenge the hegemony of male literatures but also the representation of African women in Literature ((2006: 127).

Sweet Revenge.

Sweet Revenge is a seventeen movements drama with twelve characters set in Edo state and Abuja of Nigeria. Dr. Sota Ojo is presented as the villain who impregnates an English woman, Cheryl while he was on studies abroad. Consequent upon the transition in Nigerian from military to democratic rule, Dr. Sota Ojo is called upon by his senatorial region in Nigeria to contest election upper legislative house (Senate). Dr. Sota Ojo returns to Nigeria with obsessive hatred for Aisosa, his Nigerian wife, whom he deserted for eight years. He is voted into office as senator through the massive support and great effort of the women of his district. This is due to the towering intrinsic worth of his Nigerian wife and mother of his genetic offsprings.

Dr. Sota Ojo plans to reject and divorce his Nigerian Wife, Aisosa and disagrees with his friend, Nosa over the ill treatment he gives to his wife Aisosa. Sota Ojo divorces Aisosa his Nigerian wife. She searches and finds a job with the National Medical Research Centre. She rises above her troubles and becomes contented in her broken up matrimony.

Cheryl discovers that Aisosa is Dr. Sota Ojo's first wife. This secret is disclosed by Sota's house girl. The plot of the play rolls on to present the conflict between Dr. Sota Ojo and the women of his senatorial district led by Madam Power and Madam Executive. Sota turns his back on these women and gets them detained for violating his peace. Cheryl visits Aisosa at Ede's residence and is informed that Dr. Sota Ojo was legally married in Benin before he went to the United Kingdom for studies. Cheryl She is also told to her astonishment that the marriage is blessed with full-grown children. This begins her plot to divorce Dr, Sota Ojo.

Aisosa wins an international honour for living and leading an outstanding life in periods of adversary as a mother. She is declared the most admirable mother and best wife of the world by the award organised by Cheryl in the United Kingdom. While the success story of Aisosa rises Dr. Sota Ojo loses his senatorial seat through recall. Upon the vacancy of the senatorial seat caused by the recall of Dr. Sota Ojo, the women of the senatorial district under the leadership of Madam Power and Show Dem approach and convince Aisosa to contest for the senatorial seat. The fortunes of Sota Ojo dwindle. He becomes poor; bankers threaten to take over his house for the loan he took for studies in the United Kingdom. As Sota Ojo's political profile dwindles that of Aisosa rises astronomically. She becomes a senator of the federal republic of Nigeria two times and even progressed to become the president of senate. Dr. Sota Ojo makes a dramatic return to his wife on a mission of reunion but Aisosa refuses.

Setting the scenery for the validation of the Revolt.

Sweet Revenge is a play in which subjugated women are mobilised to revolt against the patriarchy and to find a voice for themselves. The revolutionary temper of the women of the drama is galvanised by the acute rejection and divorce Dr. Sota Ojo serves his wife, Aisosa, his Nigerian wife who took care of his children while he was away for studies in the United Kingdom. This is done in preference for Cheryl, his London wife. The playwright in the construction of the drama places serious attention on a cause and effect plot configuration to validate the revolt of the women in the play.

First, the playwright leads us to the fact that women are responsible builders of the family. This is a responsibility that they cannot throw away even when they live under the most excruciating conditions of life. This is what salami justifies in the drama using Aisosa who in spite of her abandonment for eight years took care of herself and her children. Secondly, in appreciation of the qualities of Aisosa, the women of Sota Ojo's constituency decide to compensate her family by inviting her husband, Dr. Sota Ojo from England, to vie for the senatorial seat. Thirdly, these women who organised campaign and mobilised people to ensure victory for Dr. Sota Ojo as a senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria are abused, threatened, denied, frustrated and arrested by the same man they brought from England to vie for the senatorial seat. This is a case of biting the finger that feeds him. Dr. Sota Ojo by his attitude makes the women including his wives to feel that they are not important. The women are nowhere in the vision and agenda of Dr. Sota Ojo. They are kept at the margin. They are just a

means to an end. The fourth factor which justifies the revolt of the women in *Sweet Revenge* is Dr. Sota Ojo's marital relationship with his English wife which is based on deception. His marital intentions for Cheryl is genuine like Lejoka Brown of Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband has gone mad again* who marries Liza for love. But he is dishonest to her.

The women and wives in *Sweet Revenge* feel neglected, humiliated and subjugated. They decide to fight back to recuperate their voice, their identity, dignity and humanity. In this revolt against male dominance, the women speak with one voice, with collective fist of fury from points of anger, betrayal, neglect and humiliation by the villainous man, Sota Ojo.

It is the marital discrimination, humiliation, neglect and divorce which Aisosa suffers, the betrayal which Cheryl experiences and the torture and humiliation given the women of Sota's senatorial district by Sota Ojo that fired the revolutionary passion of the women. Dr. Sota Ojo is presented as a character that not only has aversion for his Nigerian wife but also for women. He belongs to the patriarchal class of men who have no modicum of respect for women. Besides, he exhibit a political attitude reminiscence of some contemporary Nigerian politicians who ride on the peoples' back to positions of authority and fortune but end up neglecting the electorates. Such is the tragic experience of the women of his senatorial district who vote him into office as senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. When they travel to Abuja to remind him

of his electoral promises, he runs into bitter conflict with them. He disowns, threatens and arrests them on the charge that they are disturbing his peace.

The Revolt.

Dr. Sota Ojo betrays the trust of his English wife ridicules and divorces his Nigerian wife and runs into bitter confrontation and conflict with the women of his constituency. This sets the atmosphere of revolt for the wives and women in the universe of *Sweet Revenge*. The women pointedly see this as male dominance and a big blow to their identity and dignity. They then resolved to fight against this brutal neglect and subjugation from men. It is significant to note that this revolt of women speaks volume of their solidarity irrespective of class, colour, and race. The solidarity women enjoy in *Sweet Revenge* is awesome like *The Wives' Revolt*, *Mulkin Matta*, *A Dance on his Grave*, *Lysistrata* etc. For *Sweet Revenge* the revolt becomes even more interesting as both African women and their European counterparts speak in one accord and act to emancipate the African woman to bring down male hegemony. This is a clarion authorial call to women of the world to unite against male dominance with the sole aim of restoring the dignity of women to their rightful place in society. Although the play is a serious comedy, the technique used by the dramatist is agitation propaganda. The language is down-to-earth, within reach and moralising but the language of the female characters is revolutionary and purposeful.

Cheryl is first to strike against her husband, she divorces him and returns to England and joins the

revolutionary movement of the women against male dominance in Africa. She strongly appreciates the excellent qualities of Aisosa as a wife and mother committed to the cause of effective management of the marital home even in the face of callous conditions. Consequently, she organises an International Award for Aisosa in London. Cheryl revolts against the fact that she is not informed by Sota Ojo that he has another wife. This is against the spirit and makeup of the British marital tradition which places emphasises on one man one wife. Cheryl challenges Sota's claim of going into polygamous home as African culture.

Cheryl: Stop hiding under the cloak of culture
Sota. Your Father never deceived his six wives; he married them according to the prevailing traditions of his time. No culture tolerates deceit. For your information you've violated CEDAW convention. (p.57)

Cheryl sees this as a perfidy and fights back to regain her dignity. She regrets her being used as a sacrificial lamb to climb the social ladder by her husband. Her insurgency against Dr. Sota Ojo intensifies against the backdrop that he has deceived her and maltreated his Nigerian wife who is the mother of his children. Hence she qualifies him as a wicked social climber.

Another angle from which the women revolt against male dominance in *Sweet Revenge* can be seen from the encounter the embittered women of Dr. Sota Ojo's senatorial district had with him. The women travel to Abuja to remind Dr. Sota Ojo and Nigie of the promises they made to them during their campaign. Their trip is a disaster. Consequently, they

contemplate a recall of Sota Ojo who has been bad to them and his Nigerian wife, Aisosa. Aisosa, in the first case is the fundamental factor for his elevation as a senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The recall is successfully executed and in his place, Aisosa, his divorced wife, is chosen by the women to be elected in a by election into senate. In this drama author and characters are clearly seen fighting the feminist battle against the patriarchy. Dr. Sota Ojo's display of ruthless male dominance prompted a revolution in which self-determination and endorsement, assertiveness and the strong pursuit of a new identity is brought to his bitterly isolated and divorced wife, Aisosa. The Action of Dr. Sota Ojo's wives falls in line with the proposition by Steady Filomena that true feminism is an abrogation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and reliant. (1986: 58). The wives and women's revolt also generate questions of racial camaraderie, gender balance, victory of motherhood and radical feminism. Every woman in the play is committed to the cause of women liberation. Not even the mother of Sota Ojo is exempted. In Sota's words,

Sota: My mother? My mother and Aisosa are best of friends. Since Aisosa left, the only time I saw my mother was when I was recalled and all she said was that I deserved what I got. She spends most of her time with Aisosa.

This is a total revolt of women and for Sota Ojo; his rejection by the women including his biological mother is a very extreme case of denunciation. Hence his friend Regie describes it as a pathetic situation.

Sweet Revenge makes a very clear proclamation about women in their revolutionary effort to withstand male sexism. The rehabilitation of Aisosa after her rejection and divorce from her husband attests to the fact that African women should turn their misfortunes generated by men to fortune. They should not sit down to lament their woes but rise above their predicaments whenever they are matrimonially smashed by men. The play revolts against the impression that when women are rejected they cannot put themselves together. Dr. Sota Ojo's family is central to the women and wives revolt in *Sweet Revenge*.

Sweet Revenge runs into present-day significance in view of its grave commitment to the issues that affect women. The play is a radical restructuring of the affiliation between men and women. It gives voice to women and galvanises the women who are constantly oppressed by the patriarchy to rise up to the task of emancipating themselves. The revolution of the women places the oppressed woman in a position of honour. Aisosa, a university graduate and a Medical Doctor who is reduced to a mere housewife by a male, rises to attain a glorious position as a senator and senate president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The remarkable statement this drama makes is that men do not have monopoly of high and exalted positions in society. Women who have the vision, the support and the drive can also make it like men. This underscores Irene Salami's commitment to the feminist movement and ideological direction. Achebe expresses the view that

When we speak of a writer's commitment, we mean his attachment to particular social aims and use of his writing to advance those social aims. This of course implies a belief that literature can and should be used as a fact for social change, and a writer has responsibility to do so (177)

In *Sweet Revenge* Salam's commitment is fundamental and outstanding. The play celebrates the African woman's capacity to rise above her problems and seek a new and profitable identity for herself. The revolution of the wives and women in the play brings together black and white women in the fight against male command. The drama supplies stimulation, mental strength and ideas for the women to fight for their rights. It promotes women's integrity and capacity to carry their destiny in their hands. *Sweet Revenge* is one drama that unites women in the battle against male domination. The play demonstrates the fact expressed by Marilyn French in her multidisciplinary book *Beyond Power: On Women, Men and Morals* that

Feminism is the only serious, coherent and universal philosophy that offers alternative to patriarchal thinking and structures. Feminist believe that women are human beings, that the two sexes are at least equal in all significant ways, and that this equality must be publicly recognised. They believe that qualities traditionally associated with women- the feminine principle are equal in value to those traditionally associated with men- the masculine principle- and that this equality must be publicly recognised(1985:142).

Thus dramatists in feminism attempt to write women into the attainment of a status of recognition through their creative

works and social movements. Salami's *Sweet Revenge* firmly reshapes gender roles in the black world with a vision intended to sensitise women to have and enjoy the power of equality with men.

Ideological Engagement in the Drama

Sweet Revenge is written as a feminist thesis drama with a revolutionary ideology that embodies and enhances contemporary thinking of the feminist movement in the world. A movement which clamours for positive attention to be accorded all angles to the question of women emancipation and empowerment. It gives credibility to the women's liberation ideology that seeks comfort in the emancipation of women from patriarchal dominance. The women and wives revolt in *Sweet Revenge* opens a very clear ideological position taken by the playwright through her characters. Cheryl breaks up her marital relationship with Dr. Sota Ojo and heads for England to carry on with her life. Aisosa accepts her divorce in good faith and goes ahead to struggle for progress in life. She rises from a senator to clinch the prestigious post of the president of senate in addition to the award of fame accorded her in the United Kingdom. She puts the humiliation, agony and divorce from her husband behind her and forges ahead. Even when Dr. Sota Ojo falls from grace to grass, becomes poor, loses his wealth and material possessions and remorsefully returns to her for assistance and the possibility of a reunion, she disagrees with him and does not go back to him. This is clearly a far-reaching stand in feminist reflection. This ideological predilection given prominence in the play

underscores the total separation of women from men. It has a creative temperament that tilts toward a radical feminist naratology. Consequently, Irene Salami's drama which presents itself as a fundamental and pragmatic voice from the margin celebrates radical feminism, a philosophy which emphasises the patriarchal pedigree of discrimination between men and women, particularly, social and cultural dominance of women by men. This feminist ideological position views patriarchy as separating gender rights, privileges and power for the most part and as a consequence imposes oppression on women and privileging men. Maureen Nwamaka Azuike in her thesis titled "A Radical Feminist Approach to the works of Zaynab Alkali" holds that

Radical feminists in Africa have their perception of women liberation similar to that of Western Feminists as suggested by Zulu Sofola and believe that love, marriage, courtship, sex roles or sexuality among others are political issues which suggest patriarchal domination. Radical feminists in Africa also define women as "the politically oppressed class" and encourage them to fight for their liberation. Suggested strategies to ensure liberation, cross culturally, include androgyny (shared roles) and the joint efforts of women to decisively end all forms of male oppression. (2003:26)

There is no gain saying that *Sweet Revenge* radically responds to the marginalisation of the African woman in a chauvinistic society which privileges the patriarchy to downgrade womanhood. Salami draws on all the female characters in the drama and some male feminist characters like Regie, through

a deliberate construction of character contrivance and thematic manipulation to fight and end male oppression. This is a logical expression of radical feminist predisposition in the representation of womanhood and motherhood in a constructive department.

Conclusion.

This paper discovers that *Sweet Revenge* is an aesthetic communication which narrates and advocates social revolution in the wives and women's struggle to end the subjugation of women. The play makes a strong recreation of the major female protagonist, Aisosa, to have a new identity and self-determination which beyond the tangential artistic stratum, extends to the subjugated Nigerian women and women of the world. *Sweet Revenge* is a sociologically conditioned drama with a strapping and sweeping feminist subtext. Hence it calls for the emancipation of women under the patriarchy and the actualization of women's empowerment, women's clamour for new identity and solidarity in the face of male dominance. Salami has shown with the example of Aisosa, that an African woman should not be helplessly reliant on her spouse for continued existence to make a secure forte for herself in a society subjugated by male prejudice. The point can then be made that Irene Salami's exploration of issues of feminism takes account of the calculated intimation and celebration of the intrinsic worth of the African woman. In this drama, it is understandable that she is a feminist in the artistic cosmos, indubitably, a sweeping

archetype. Finally the paper holds that the play is a well-founded testament of Irene Salami's successfully employment of woman liberation ideologies to her creativity for the singular purpose of giving voice and agency to the marginalized women of Africa.

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