

Rising Profile of a Female Dramatist Irene Isoken Salami and New Nigerian Woman-Centred Drama

Mabel I. E. Evwierhoma, PhD

Professor of Theatre Arts
Department of Theatre Arts
University of Abuja
Abuja, Nigeria.

Introduction

The profile of Irene Salami, a new Nigerian female academic and dramatist is rising on the horizon of drama in Nigeria. Her major plays now numbering about four, attest to a new concern in female dramatic creativity in the country. The centredness of women and the milieu, in which they find themselves in her plays, reveal a growing interest in more women having a stronger voice in plays, telling their own stories and affirming themselves. That she has dramatic foremothers to emulate or get inspiration from in the likes of Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, Stella Oyedepo, Catherine Acholonu, Julie Okoh, Onyekachi Onyekuba, Folashayo Ogunrinde, and others, is reassuring and furthers the goal of woman-centredness in Nigerian drama. As a third generation Nigerian dramatist, her voice can no longer be muted in the attempt to make contemporary, the issues highlighting or hemlining women. Every female dramatist faces the choice of underscoring or minimising the roles women play in the text or on stage. Salami's choice can be said to be for the former, judging from her three most recent plays. What is important here is that her treatment of the issues, which are referred to, as women's concerns cannot be taken to stand for the way other women writers treat these same issues and concerns. That Salami chooses to write on women and men in

Mabel I. E. Evwierhoma, PhD

politics buttresses Bryson's opinion that "we cease to treat men as the unquestioned norm of humanity" and make "masculinity come up for scrutiny" (248).

Emotan

Salami's first major play *Emotan* depicts the stereotype women in Edo society in particular, and the Nigerian society in general. The Bini society is acclaimed to be highly rich in culture and tradition. However, this culture in its richness hemlines women, limiting their autonomy, through taboos and observances which many see as obsolete, behind the times and retrogressive. However, many part ways with this stand and glory in everything that the culture stands for. *Emotan* in Bini history was a quiet simple market woman, who despite her status and the public opinion of the period took a resolve to change her society for the better. *Emotan* advocated the participation of women in activities outside the home, especially income-generating ones. In present times, she is regarded as the catalyst for women's role in political leadership, especially as 'king maker', as she is a power to be reckoned with where Oba Ewuare's kingship is. She typifies a woman who rises above the ashes of widowhood and hemlining socio-cultural forces to ascend the peak of politics in the kingdom. Paraphrasing Brimstone, one sees in *Emotan*'s position over Ewuare's reinstatement, the resolve of a woman who, in the feminist sense, "demands constant renewal and re-engagement at every level," and places much stress on plurality, conversation and continuation (288). Thus a woman who with determination and affirmation moves from oblivious periphery to the dominant centre should elicit a cogent response from women readers, critics and others who encounter her in text and performance.

Emotan therefore, signifies a woman's role in the home front, outside the home, in the means of production and the

ownership of capital. The woman identification she enjoys, through her positive relationship with other women and children, is commendable and is a lesson to be learnt by many in contemporary times. She rendered assistance uncommon to her gender at the time, to Ewuare the Great, also known as Ogun, to return from exile and ascend the throne of Benin, as king, banishing the usurper, Uwaifiokun. Thus Emotan can be said to affirm the historical projection of women through the various facets of time — the now, the then, and the next.

The Queen Sisters

The above play continues the saga involving Emotan in the palace intrigues that restored Ogun (Oba Ewuare) as Benin king circa 1440 A.D. *The Queen Sisters* reveals the intra-gender politics that takes place in the Oba's harem of ten wives, among whom the last two are sisters. Oba Ewuare marries Ubi, the daughter of Chief Ogieka of Benin as a coolant to his frayed and overheated nerves from conquest. Ubi came from a privileged background and this enhanced status makes the conflict she generates in the harem to be tolerated momentarily and is almost overlooked. Had she been the daughter of a commoner, the case would have been different. Ubi becomes controller in the harem, apportioning sleeping rights with the king often rotated among all wives, to herself. Ogun obliges her role especially as she is the last wife of the king and since such matters often massage male ego as the tussle between women is for the kings' scarce affection. Ubi's capacity to instigate and control harem politics is commendable. The harem is an avenue of rivalry, strife, and tussle to please the king. When Ubi centres herself in the affairs of this space fraught with intra-gender hatred, we see other *ilois* or wives attempting to locate themselves in this locus of attraction.

She does not stop at the harem as her influence soon

spreads to the city. She looks down on certain traditions, assaults chiefs and creates problems. This was not to last for long as Chief Osuma's antidote to Ubi's perceived excesses was for the king to marry Ubi's younger sister Ewere. This rather pits Ubi against the king's latest acquisition her sibling. Ubi frames Chief Osuma in a crime of rape and her sister Ewere in an assassination bid. Even when she is caught bedwetting, Ubi's strength of character does not diminish. Her bedwetting – a taboo in the palace earns her stigma as she is banished to the forest. Having a change of heart, she confesses to her framing the Chief and her sister. The convicts awaiting execution are released and Ubi is chased out of the city. Thereafter peace and calm is restored to the palace and the city with Ubi being the requisite "sacrifice."

In the city, to date, this incident is commemorated in a festival "Ugie Ewere" where festival leaves called *Ewere* leaves are used to usher in favour, peace, and progress. On the other hand, Ubi has come to mean evil, hatred and wickedness. *The Queen Sisters* attempts to revise the way Bini history, culture and tradition holds Ubi in denigration. As a radical she existed before her time because most of the views and actions she is condemned for are actually in vogue today. She may be accused of not being messianic since her revolt is not for the women in the palace. Perhaps she needed the self-affirmation first before fighting the cause of others. Brought into a constricting patriarchal environment, the only option open to her may have been to assert herself and do so to the detriment of the men and women within and without the palace. A woman brought into the king's harem as chattel may attempt to make her entrance into the palace pivotal to the events there and thermostatically regulate the "atmospheric temperature" of the palace environment - talking in metaphorical terms. The bedwetting may be seen as a metaphor of the way women are

held responsible even for certain minute, natural or biological problems.

More than Dancing

This is the latest play published by Irene Salami and in the introductory remarks to the play; Monday Ekpe sees it as a propagandist play with persuasion as its primary aim. Here, politics and women's political destiny dominate the plot. *More Than Dancing* is the playwright's attempt to make women confront the socio-political challenges that have faced them for generations past and still continue to face them. Women are seen to affirm themselves in the field as politicians, activists and at the home front as wives, mothers and sisters of the men folk. The gradual enthroning of democracy in the Nigerian political terrain has shown that there is a lot for women at the private or public sphere. Nevertheless, the rise of democratic ideals, its nascence and development have brought to the fore, the problem of internecine conflict, strife and unrest as well as the crises of political succession within the political parties and in the body politic. Whither the woman in these landscapes of struggles for legitimacy between the old and new, male and female, traditional and modern ethics?

What the play does is to try to carve a direction for Nona, the heroine; who as a Nigerian woman bears the brunt of dialectical shifts between what a woman is, what culture and society expect her to be and what evolves out of both stances. Erstwhile political parties were structured in such a way that women were seen and heard when dancing troupes were to entertain party faithfuls or they were to be fed. At other times oblivion welcomed them in the women's wing where they had no influence over the goings on in the party mainstream. Mary Hawkesworth asks a curious but pertinent question:

If democracy is understood as a mode of governance that respects the dignity of human beings, affords rights and immunities to individuals, fosters individual freedom and development, and encourages collective action to achieve political benefits, then why are these gendered effects so palpable? And how can such blatant inequities continue ...? (299)

Hawkesworth believes that the press, social scientists and other people should ensure that the gender inequities in the polity should be examined and critiqued. This is what *More Than Dancing* attempts to do and has done reasonably well except for a few inadequacies mentioned. Hawkesworth declares at the end of her essay:

Contesting the reconstitution of political space as male space can illuminate the gulf between democratization and democracy... Contesting gender power in liberal democratic institutions may help feminists repoliticize their emancipatory struggles. Holding political parties and elected officials accountable to inclusive norms of democracy may be one way to reopen the very old question of whose lives are to count politically and whose interests are to be served through democratic decision-making. (310)

One would therefore not be out of reason to say that the play text can be subtitled "A Play of Contests" as the citation above depicts what the women in the play did through collective action and contest.

The heroines of the play as we see them in the tableau in Movement Three are not to be held guilty of dancing, though

we see them do a lot of that. The gains in Salami lumping them together to achieve the full conscientisation of Nona is worthwhile, as she is woken from the slumber of political ineptitude. From different social strata of the society, literate and illiterate, we see them take their future in their hands and not in their bellies, hankering after political crumbs from the giant male-centred tables. The male conspiracy against the women does not work. The play's cogent message is the statement by Hakeem, the gender-sensitive party faithful:

The continued exclusion of women from decision-making positions in the nation will slow down the pace of development of the democratic process and stunt the economic growth of the nation. (35)

The concern for complementarities in the face of gender difference is clear in the play as Nona says: "We are not anti men" (49). This is also Ojo-Ade's (53) opinion when he asserts: "the point about woman's originality and uniqueness must be noted; so also should the element of complementarity between her roles and those of man".

Spousal support for career tracking and political ambition is also fore grounded. Ambassador Uyi supports Nona and even tutors her in political etiquette; something that is missing today in the political class. The support of women by women is appreciated in the play and is commendable as this is logically carried to the end as they achieve their goal – Nona as president. The patriarchal myth is that women's support for one another is elusive. *More Than Dancing* demystifies this claim. Salami's use of history is wide, as ancestresses of Nigerian history are again employed in Movement Eight to strengthen the political angst of the heroine Nona. However, one wonders why she is true to history without questioning or revising history in some

respects to reveal core aspects of "herstory" in view of recent trends in political realities.

Some of such instances are the unquestioning acceptance of human sacrifice (64) and before then, the messianic attributes of the mothers of history are not redressed to relay the modernity of mass and communal struggles to affirm the common good and goals of the land. Were the soldiers used by Inikpi, Idia, Amina, Moremi, Kambassa, Madam Tinubu, Nwanyeruwa, Funmilayo Kuti, Emotan, and Gambo Sawaba, completely useless? Were the victories won by these mothers of ours single-handedly achieved? One other issue that should be addressed is the issue of heroine overload. The text draws on one heroine too many. For a particular example, Emotan the eponymous heroine of one of her recent texts, was the icon of reference in the said text. The foremothers arrayed in Movement Three may have been split into two, a few appearing then and the rest in Movement Eight. It was a reception much deserved when the heroines were asked of the background of events by Mama Nigeria in Movement Eleven.

The domestic imbroglio in Nona's household only helps Nona to achieve self-affirmation. The very present reality of not depending excessively on godmothers and godfathers or even backers in politics is stressed by Madam Nigeria when the heroines of history are exorcised from Nona's psyche and therefore, centre stage by Madam Nigeria, who says their time is over and the women of here and now must face their challenges and make their own history. This is underscored information and should be entrenched in the political education women must undergo today. Male hegemony can only last as far as women permit it to. It is now the choice of women to be excluded or included in the scheme of things, men cannot decide fully on the exclusion of women. Moreover, participation is now the emphasis in the scheme of politics. Ackerly (38)

says of feminist discourse:

Third World feminist social criticism complements deliberative democratic theory by providing a means for improving both the quality and equality of public participation.

Ackerly continues in her analysis of the shades and forms of feminist criticism and feminist development theories in some countries like Bangladesh, Austria, America and other countries by declaring:

The political strategy of Third World feminism is to oppose domination in its many forms. Third World feminists critique capitalism, including the means of economic growth, commercialization, and market expansion. (59)

Reality dawns, as Nona, through a critiquing attitude of her present, past and future, becomes president, with the active participation of other women in the electoral process. Ameze, Nona's alter ego provides an insight into the past spousal relationship between Uyi and Nona. For a woman who was once estranged and alienated from her husband when he abandoned her for a white woman in Sweden, Nona's dogged loyalty to her husband in the wake of her political turmoil is almost annoyingly slavish. Through this affirming stance, the women succeed in debunking all claims put in place to prevent the political mainstreaming of women. Other important issues focused upon by the dramatist include the gender-specific problem of Vesicco Vagina Fistulae (VVF), the plight of girl mothers, the problem of education, the militant oil youths of the Niger Delta, and the core issue of liberation for women. To have an upcoming dramatist with a rising profile, as Irene

Salami's is welcome as this means more texts for readers, critics and play producers to analyse. The future is still pregnant in terms of what it will give birth to concerning Salami's dramatic output and the reception awaiting it.

Conclusion

Irene Salami can no longer be ignored in the literary landscape of literature or literary drama in Nigeria. Her creativity is even more pertinent as it concerns women's issues and the development goals they seek to affirm. This is a positive turn of events, for as our female writers increasingly migrate to destinations outside our shores, some writers have to remain at home in Nigeria to codify in written texts and stage performances, the contemporary realities that shape our lives. This is not to say Diasporic tendencies which shape the lives of our nationals at home and abroad are not significant, but the home front, one wagers, is very important as our literary history becomes globally relevant. It is expected that from history, propaganda, and surface treatment of the economic bases of the Nigeria polity, Salami will begin to focus on the cogent ideological factors, which colour the happenings in her society and present proactive, forward-looking, non-reactionary textual and contextual women.

Works Cited

- Ackerly, A. Brooke. *Political Theory and Feminist Social Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Brimstone, Lyndie. "Taking the Next Step". *An Introduction to Women's Studies*. Eds Beryl Madoc-Jones and Jennifer Coates. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Limited, 1996.
- Bryson, Valerie. *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction* (2nd edn). New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Evwierhoma, Mabel. *Female Empowerment and Dramatic*

- Creativity in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications, 2002.
- Hawkesworth, Mary E. "Democratization: Reflections on Gendered Dislocations in the Public Sphere." *The Socialist Feminist Project: A Contemporary Reader in Theory and Politics*. Ed. Nancy Holmstrom. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002.
- Ojo-Ade, Femi. *Being Black, Being Human: More Essays on Culture*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 1996.