

**FEMALE DRAMATISTS, DISTINCTION AND THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY: AN  
EXAMINATION OF ZULU SOFOLA AND TESS ONWUEME'S SELECT PLAYS**

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**Abstract**

*In times past, the realm of playwriting in Nigerian theatre was seriously and meritoriously ruled and wholly influenced by male writers. In recent times, there are several female writers and dramatists who have risen to the level of prominence which their male counterparts had exclusively enjoyed in the past. Some of these writers include Julie Okoh, Chimamanda Adichie, Irene Salami, Buchi Emechata, Chimah Utoh, Stella Oyedepo, amongst others. This papert focuses on two female dramatists in Nigeria: Zulu Sofola, and Tess Onwueme who have outstanding works that can be certified evergreen. The paper examines their influences to the wake of female dramatists in the Nigerian playwriting realm. It portrays female dramatists in Nigeria as "writers of distinction." It discusses the thematic preoccupation in relation to their works, especially how their works exult the strength, intelligence and creative mind of the Nigerian woman. Knowledge acquired is no waste to the human faculty; rather, it is a plus to the co-existence of the human race. The entire body of this paper thrives on exposure, opportunity, creativity, and the acknowledgement of remarkable craft by women whose epochal efforts in the theater genre were once disregarded due to their sex, often as a result of social construction of gender. This research stands to remind the masses, especially the male folk, of the outstanding works of the female dramatists in Nigeria. None can dispute the fact that these female dramatists have made outstanding contribution to the growth of the Nigeria theatre. The paper is intrinsically relevant to scholarly research and study standing out as one academic research work beneficial to students of literary research and the humanities in general.*

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**Introduction**

The perception of women has been that of weakened relevance and subordination tied to the miscellaneous oppressions they face in a world referred to as “a man’s world”. The world at large views the women as the weaker sex in different conditions – mental and physical disabilities. In the midst of such challenges, some women have made enormous strides in distinguishing themselves amongst other women, making gigantic impacts which will everlastingly be remembered. Some societies in Africa have had women who ruled kingdoms and led conquest wars. Examples of such recognized cum documented women are Berber queen known as the Kahina of the Maghreb (17<sup>th</sup> century), Magajiyas of Duara (9<sup>th</sup> century), Queen Amina of Zazzau (16<sup>th</sup> century), Nzinga of Angola (19<sup>th</sup> century), and Nehanda of Zimbabwe (19<sup>th</sup> century). Feminist thinkers have argued and are still arguing that Western feminism derived much of its inspiration from Africa. Women in Africa have suffered severe conditions such as growing and harvesting crops on farmlands during pregnancy, as well as fetching water and logs of wood with children strapped to their backs during nursing with little or no help from their husbands or guardians. Women, in general, have endured emphatic stigmatization and oppression in their homes and elsewhere. Education had been the male child’s birthright, with the enforcement of domestic duties on the girl child growing into womanhood with the conception of being the weaker sex not only in physical strength but also in the psyche. In many societies, especially in Africa, man’s acknowledgement of the input and contributions of women on the growth of the economy, family, and nation as a whole is still farfetched.

Nigeria today is approaching her 54<sup>th</sup> independence, and in all these years, many theatre practitioners and dramatists have come on the scene to develop Nigeria’s theatre. Zulu Sofola, first female professor of theatre Arts in Africa; Julie Okoh, a professor and Tess Onwueme (PhD) of whom Dr. Sonja Darlington refers to as the first African female dramatist to break into the literary rank of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o are three of those. The development of Nigerian theatre is not “man-made” rather it is of the inclusion and contribution of the women folk who have immensely helped in the building of Nigerian theatre to the standard it is today. Women have been highly active and impacting in all aspects and roles in the theatre, such as in playwriting, directing, acting, singing, management, choreographing. They have also written several plays.

A popular maxim posits that what men can do women can do better. But is there any validity to this argument in our society today? There have been many cases where women have been denied equal opportunities in terms of their yearnings for exposure, training, practice, and recognition. Yet, women who have shown apt dedication and interest in education and craft have always excelled in their fields of study or practice. Today, we have women addressed as Professors, Doctors, and Honorables. Women are also recognized as tutors, politicians, writers, and so on. Our focus is the accomplishment of jobs done by Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme in the field of playwriting in Nigeria.

One play each by these two dramatists will be scrutinized, bringing out the feminist elements in each, and how the dramatists have emphasized feminism in their plays. These plays are *Wedlock of the Gods* (Sofola) and *The Reign of Wazobia* (Onwueme). The plays have strong themes and subject matters relating to social ills in Nigeria especially as encountered by women

mainly of the low and middle classes. This is not to say that women of the high class do not face certain discriminations. They do but to a limit due to their status in the society which can be tied to their educational background or their legal links to persons of influence and affluence.

### **A brief history, perspective and contributions of the Nigerian woman to motherhood**

The first generation of African female writers include Mabel Segun, Flora Nwapa (Nigeria); Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Theodora Sutherland (Ghana); Grace Ogot, Hazel Ogot, Charity Waciuma (Kenya); Bassie Head, Nadine Gordimer (South Africa). In the other category, however, there are writers like Adaora Lily-Ulasi, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali, Zulu Sofola, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Stella Dia Oyedepo, Esther Bali, Ifeoma Okoye, Remi Adedeji, Tess Onwueme, Teresa Meniru, Helen Ovibiagele, Folashayo Ogunrinde (all from Nigeria) and similar younger generation of women writers from other parts of Africa such as Mariama Ba, Aminata Sow Fall (Senegal); Micere Mugo, Joyce Ochineg, Asenath Odaga, Wangui Wa Goro (Kenya); Penina Muhande (Tanzania), Jane Bakaluba, Sindiwe Magona, Loretta Ngocobo (South Africa); Julie Okoh, Chimah Utoh, Irene Salami (Nigeria), and others across the continent. The splendid creativity of these women in literary creativity such as novels and dramas has promoted the reading culture of youths and adults today. This work is an addition to the growing literature on the need to understand the creativity of female dramatists in Nigeria.

One of the assertions that gave rise to the emergence of female dramatists is the need for women to express themselves through the medium of drama. Female dramatists have made it a point of duty to use the theatre as a vehicle for transformation and raising women's consciousness. Rolf Solberg recommends that 'one of the ways of correcting one's faulty image of the African woman would be through the African woman seen from the "inside", in other words, rendered by women' (249). The creativity of female dramatists seeks to make genuine feminine consciousness as created by women. Dorothy Driver argues that writing by women is also desirous of using "literature as a means of giving autonomous value to women's experience by helping women perceive the political, economic, and social oppression to which women were subjected as well as attempt to bring about new standards against which women would be measured and of dispending with the old standards" (203).

Elaine Showalter in *The New Feminist Criticism* gives a wide assessment of women writing and sums up the female art as having "its own unique character whether because it draws on female body images, uses 'women's language', expresses the female psyche or reflects women's cultural position" (14). The four major characteristics of female writing shown by Showalter above include the use of 'female body images', 'woman language,' 'expressing the female psyche', and showing 'women's cultural position'. Showalter argues that they contain elements of self-determination, if not self-affirmation. In employing these elements, silence is being debunked and speech or writing encouraged.

Generally, Nigeria has an impressive amount of excellent and effective female dramatists who have reached the height of building the Nigerian theatre to the point of great respect and admiration. These dramatists have huge approbation to their efforts in terms of artistic achievements. Right from the onset of the Nigerian arts unto the present day, all these dramatists have been remarkably ground-breaking, innovative and outstanding. Their artistic credibility and mental power parallel that of most male dramatists, and notable scholars have identified and

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acknowledged this fact. The craft of these dramatists is rich and entertaining and thrives on exposure, education, interrogation and enlightenment. Helen Chukwuma in *Women Writing: Feminism and National Development in Nigeria*: an Inaugural lecture, posits that “Nigerian women writers have shared and disseminated useful information that is aimed at creating an awareness in the women and the society of what it means to be a woman” (16). Ama Ata Aidoo argues that the female dramatist should dedicate her creative energies to expository work. To her, the female writer should take the task of “exposing the sexist tragedy of woman’s history protesting the on-going degradation of women, celebrating their physical and intellectual capabilities and above all, unfolding a revolutionary vision of their roles” (16).

In a similar notion, Driver had declared a view, which corresponds with Aidoo’s. Driver posits that the onus rests on female writers “to reveal explicitly and aggressively, their consciousness and consequently address themselves to the problem of defining that consciousness (209). These ideas emphasize the need for the female creativity since, according to Mary Linton-Umoh, “the significant contributions of African women in traditional African society have been ignored and minimized by men.” One question to consider in this paper is since female characters created by male dramatists are few and not very strong, what can female dramatists do to correct this? Umuokoro (2003) in *Female Empowerment and Dramatic Creativity in Nigeria* states that Eviweirhoma “attempts a critical dissection of the female psyche from a three-pronged perspective of the woman as a writer, as a character, and as a reader” (VI). Female dramatists are obliged to represent the image of the woman in a brighter picture. The brilliant dramatists listed in this study have, however, done well in showcasing the prominence women characters have not enjoyed in the past in literary drama. Their works try to challenge the negative picture some male as well as female writers have created in some of their creative writings. Gauthier in “Is There Such a Thing as Women’s writing?” stresses

Why women should not remain silent. In her words, “Women are, in fact, caught in a very red contradiction throughout the course of history, they have been mute, and it is doubtless by virtue of this mutism that men have been able to speak and write. As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process” (162).

As it stands, it has therefore become the duty of female dramatists to reconstruct and redefine the woman’s image so as to make history, for history seems to be designed, projected and written by men. Writing makes up history and it is open to women to make their points. Therefore, women’s writing should reflect their real place in the history of humankind such that women’s history should form part of the majority of men’s history as advocated by Gerda Lerner who insists that the responsibility lies on women to become integral component of the historical process especially that which impacts on women themselves. Hence, Lerner explains that:

Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male-centered terms.

What would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by the values they define? (52).

It is possible to argue that Lerner's opinion above is seemingly "exaggerating" for it could be misleading to assert that "women have been left out of history" (12). Concerning the awareness of women's problem in the history of writing, Janelle Reinelt advocates a 'reconceptualization' of the place of women in history. Reinelt asserts that:

Reconceptualizing women's place in history has been a fertile ground for feminist struggle. Not only have women discovered that they have been systematically excluded from the "great man"... they have also discovered that many traditional attitudes towards women have historical precedents (160).

Years ago, critics of Zulu Sofola had challenged her to writing on "today's reality", leaving behind the old idea of certain traditions which gave no positive ends. But today, both Sofola and Onwueme with some other female dramatists have written positively-commanding respect and honour which this study sets out to show. In the words of Olu Obafemi, "it is high time Zulu Sofola used the position of influence and prominence she enjoys, as a leading female dramatist in Nigeria to positive and pertinent ends. She must move away from the old school and depict realities of today" (16).

Sequel to the above, this work is academic and aims to encourage women's interest in studying, practicing and achieving in all ramifications. Several authorities around the globe have expressed opinions in assessing the woman as a reader. Raman Selden suggests that reading as women helps foreground the values of women. He states that:

If we think positively in terms of reading as women, we immediately see that for a long time reading has assumed a male perspective and that there is a real difference of views when the experience and values of women became central, in the act of reading. Zulu Sofola was perhaps, the most significant female dramatist in Africa during her time. In a male dominated world where the voice of women seemed unheard and under-appreciated Zulu Sofola stepped forward and distinguished herself as a literary icon and an excellent dramatist (Olakitan:1).

Zulu's dream all started from her parents who believed in educating the girl child. In those days, it was not "sensible" to send female children to school. There was the fear that educating a girl-child might hinder her from getting a good husband but Zulu's parents made a different choice from this norm. She did not only school in Nigeria but equally in the United States of America. In *Remembering Zulu Sofola: Great Woman of Theatre* Yemi Olakitan described Zulu as "a woman with a strong passion for African Drama and literature" (1). Through her numerous works, she used her privileged education to tell the story of her people, projecting the culture which drew appreciation from people of diverse culture. Zulu used her plays to address issues of justice and individual's freedom. She also used her talent and intellect

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as a playwright to explain the relevance of tradition and cultural practices and their boundaries and limitations in human relationship.

**Female Dramatists in Nigeria**

The Nigerian theatre had been dominated by men, and in their writings, the portrayal of women has been poor in the society, portraying them as house-wives, docile, unexposed, unreasonable, and sometimes even as witches. But in a counter to this, female dramatists in Nigeria have emerged and presented women in “strong, progressive and assertive heroic roles” (Metthusalah: 1), projecting the impact of women to the growth of the society.

Many female dramatists have contributed greatly to the development of Nigerian theatre, and a highlight of this contribution is integral to this discourse. The influence of these female dramatists being analyzed, looking into some of their works. The thematic pre-occupations of these female dramatists are therefore outlined. The discourse shall flow in three phases: the early, the later and the contemporary periods.

The early period of playwrighting in Nigeria was dominated by Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, and Ola Rotimi. Zulu Sofola only emerged a little later. Almost every play of these three forerunners celebrates the power and glory of men. These highly drawn heroes range from Kurunmi in *Kurunmi* and Odewale in *The Gods Are not to be Blame* authored by Ola Rotimi; Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka; Ozidi in *Ozidi* by J.P. Clark. However, the female characters placed alongside these heroes are weak, choiceless, invisible, unreliable etc, as drawn in the perceptive of traditions. Mosadiwni, the wife of Kurunmi is an example of this. Sadiku in *The Lion and the Jewel*, Rola in *A dance of Forest*, Lyaloja and Bride in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Amope in *The Trial of Brother Jero* all by Soyinka do not play any heroic roles but are mostly objectified as anti heroes, temptresses to the heroes or just plain wives. The woman penitent in this same play is painted with desperation, who goes through despair and despondence as she bewails her inability to conceive a child. She prays that her barrenness be taken away so she can be a normal member of the society. In Clark's *Song of a Goat*, Ebieri suffers a similar fate which lead her to sexual relations with Tonye, her husband also ends in an incestuous affairs with her son Odwale. In *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* we were presented with a scenario of women at the call of me. Beneath the face of comedy in the play, and the language used lies a fractious atmosphere among the three women, all jostling for the attention of their husband. The masculinity orientation of Rotimi is reflected even in the Proverbs he uses in his works. A re-reading of many of his plays shows how a lot of these proverbs are male oriented (Evwlerhoma: 93). The work celebrates male process, wisdom, intelligence, wit, tact and boldness (Methuselah: 3). The negative stereotypes of women have continued to spread into a greater number of Nigerians' plays authored by male writers. Therefore, there is a tacit agreement in the works of these pioneer male dramatists over the society outlook on women. This is tied to the historical assertion that women have always been constructed as weak and inferior to men. They were socialized to be homemakers and agriculturist (Ityaverer and Obiajunwa: 3).

Zulu Sofola evolved at the time most great Nigerian male dramatists were leading the arts. She debuted in 1991 with *The Disturbed Peace of Christmas*. Though Sofola was a female,

her entry into the intellectual competition did not alter the image of women in literary drama. It only reaffirmed men's superiority and supremacy over women. Sofola's dramas in addition gave domination to men imaging in the society. Going through her plays, one can observe the regular conflict of the old and new culture, but in ideology the old usually triumphs. Sofola is a traditionalist, for her plays overwhelm and enchant the sacredness of traditions, whereby she never hesitates to bring down any of her characters who dare to go against it. For her, the inviolability of tradition must be maintained and respected at all cost in spite of its inert and unprogressive nature. Therefore, in many of her plays, any attempt by women to break free from this traditional sacredness incurs a vicious backlash. In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Ogwoma is punished for failing to respect the tradition of observing the period of mourning of her dead husband in spite of the fact that it was a loveless union contracted by force. In *Old Wines Are Tasty*, the message passed is that one cannot merely disregard tradition no matter how much enlightenment they may have in character. In *The Sweet Trap*, male supremacy over the female takes centre stage. This situation is understandable in form of an attempt by the character, Clara, who attempted to challenge an age old injunction that the husband's word is law. Either right or wrong it is to be accepted. Clara had indicated an intention to have a birthday party. But Femi Sotub, her husband, disagrees to this. However, she is convinced by a friend to have the party elsewhere which turns into embarrassment and near tragedy. Using a symbolism to show man's supremacy, Clara is made to kneel before her husband to ask for forgiveness. Once again tradition has won. Most of Sofola's works are constructed towards the same line. In *The wizard of law*, Sikira is portrayed as a temptress who compels her husband to indulge in skullduggery to satisfy her whims and caprices. Zulu Sofola is still notable for being the only female dramatists to have stood up in sure recognition in the midst of other great Nigerian male dramatist.

Later period indicates the period after the Nigerian civil war when the country was wrecked for more than three years with the loss of lives and properties. The oil boom in the country made for a possibility of rehabilitation. This oil discovery had taken the place of corps that hitherto were exported abroad. Money was all around the country but dishonesty had its head in high and top places. Consequently, the nation became a cesspit of corruption and squander. Nationally, the rich were becoming richer and the poor poorer. This paved way for class consciousness in the society.

In the realm of the arts, a new breed of dramatists evolved to counter this export of the masses by the ruling elite. This new breed of writers and some of old ones deviated from the old order of playwriting which was "static and bizarre...peopled with desperado protagonists, helpless victims of fate who cannot deliver themselves" (Gbilekaa:1). Tess Onwueme is the female dramatist who dominated this period. The gallery of Onwueme's plays is displayed by more women character. Her womanist ideology is quite evident in most characters of her drama. She makes out vivid pictures of the women and consciously reinvents their positions. Onwueme's works can be said to be subversive via her dramatic expression where she unsubscribe to the usual situation where women are objects in negative light and perception. Dissident literature is that which "consciously or unconsciously undermine the received idea that men are superior to women and men should dominate women" (Breen:x). Via Onwueme's works and later female dramatists, we are given insight into the thematic pre occupation of women writers. Basically, most of these writings are in reaction to male authored works which women consider to be distorted and inaccurate representation of the women folk. Most plays by women are therefore

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“concerned with reversing the process of denigration, disfigurement, self contempt and erasure” (Morgan: 98). Other issues present in works by female writers include the following:

- Subverting male hegemony by reversing roles in their plays. This is to say women, who hitherto occupied menial unimportant roles, are captured in dynamic roles while men peep from the rear.
- Projecting cultural practices that harm women and condemning them-calling for their abolition.
- Criticizing patriarchy and male egotism which socially constructs women as inferior to men.
- Agitating for social change and enlightenment.
- Celebrating culture and agitating for its preservation.
- Projecting women as being of equal intelligence and disposition with men.

Most of these themes can be observed in many women's works. But then the role of the women is central for most of the stories are created around them. Haven said that, the female characters in Onwueme's plays are empowered, focused, strong and assertive. Such characters as Gladys in *A Hon Too Soon*, Ona in *The Broken Calabash*, Wazobia in *The Reign of Wazobia*, Rufina in *The Artist Homecoming*, and the women of Idu in *Tell it to Women*, all celebrate the multiplicities of human emotions, changes and triumphs with the women figure in the central of it all. These women refuse to be satisfied with their society-carved out role. They all fight their way through obstacles and proved their mettle. At a time when the absence of any female voice for women within the Nigerian playwright circle was obvious, Onwueme's plays served to illuminate the courage of women. However, one notable male playwright to emerge at this time is Femi Osafisan. His writing did not sail in the same boat that the older male playwrights did in their traditional sociological portrayal of women. He refuses to replicate tradition; rather, he goes to refine it at this discretion. His plays; *Once Upon Four Robbers*, *Fires Burn and Die Hard*, and *Moruntodun*, all signify the positive role that women play in society. Bode Sowande and some other later dramatists revolutionized the role of women in their works.

The outstanding foundation laid out by Tess Onwueme is well supported and raised by the women discussed in this phase: the contemporary period. In terms of periodization, this phase can be traced back to the middle 1980s spanning down to the present period. At this time, the Oil boom and political acrobatic had placed Nigeria in danger with the nation's economy suffering a backlash of the corruption in high places. Although women still wrote on woman emancipation, they tackled other issues of the day such as economic, social and political issues. A gradual shift from the emphasis of feminism to more universal themes was observed, though they still had feminist ideology. In this period, some plays by the female dramatist's traditional and cultural practices that are oppressive to women. Prolific female dramatists like Stella Oyedepo made her entry first, some may even argue, about the same time as Tess Onwueme. However, it can be debated that Oyedepo's skill in playwriting gained prominence and blossomed in the middle 1980s, her earlier play with the title *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested* was so radically and Eurocentrically feminist but in her later works she deviates from her tough and direct expression, adopting a more amenable womanish approach to tackle the woman issue. Other remarkable

dramatists in this period include Julie Okoh, Irene Salami and Tracy Chimah Utoh. These female dramatists clearly project the yearning and aspirations of the Nigeria woman. Like Onwueme, the works of these dramatists anchor on women. Issues of betrayal, infidelity, cultural suppression, and objectification are spread around their plays with women suffering the forces of male oppression. But unlike Sofola's plays where women are easily influenced, controlled and disciplined, the female characters in the plays of these contemporary female dramatists are empowered to take a stand and fight back. Though not always, but to a great extent these dramatist succeed in portraying women as the injured folk in a society that limits their wishes of developing themselves.

In Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested*, we are presented with a highly aggressive picture of women who are willing to use even guns to fight for their rights because they have been denied of it. Likewise, in Chimah Utoh's *Our wives Have Gone Mad Again*, women are displayed in a similar form of action-aggressiveness. Utoh emphasizes on roles reversal as she portrays the husband, Inyang, as more of a house boy than the master of the home. On the other hand, his wife is imbued with a large-than-life personality, possessing an economical empowerment which she uses to bully him. Utoh suggests that economic disempowerment can break stranglehold that men have over women.

Okoh, in *Edewede*, takes on a daunting task in discussing female genital mutilation. This play has its brilliance in capturing the traumatizing experience of women and the imposition of cultural practices that only served as a control measures on women.

In *Edewede* and *In the Fullness of Time*, she does not spare words in tackling and condemning what she indicates as barbaric practice that has no place in the twenty first century. She uses the strong women characters to fight this archaic system. So, in a village where women are known to be docile, *Edewede* succeeds in rousing their consciousness to bring themselves together to fight this practice. They succeed in destroying this practice by going on strike, as reminiscent to what the women in J.P. Clarak's *The Wives Revolt* did.

Irene Salami's *More Than Dancing* and Chimah Utoh's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again* display strong female characters who take on the world of politics- a zone known to be the sole preserve of men, and conquered their male rivals. In *More Than Dancing*, Prof. Nora Odaro displays the highest form of political shrewdness and cunning that men who had underestimated her were dazed after her supposed victory. In *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, Irene's case was that she used the most unconventional methods to secure the presidential ticket. Once more Utoh makes her point on behalf of women which suggests that what a man can do, a woman can equally achieve.

In this period, the greatest number of plays highlights the "prey and predator" motif. This is a situation where a woman is placed at the wall of an insensitive, unfaithful, and uncaring spouse. The husband is a callous brute always at the neck of his wife who is presented as faithful, caring, loving. And calm. He disregards her feeling, stepping on her emotions, and doing with her whatever he wants. Most of these female dramatists have written at least one play on this subject and have presented women in this way.

In Chimah Utoh's *Everyday is for the Thief*, the character Chudi deceives Amaka and Oby, exploiting them to the apex until the day they made the discovery. In *Nneora: An African Doll's House*, Nneora sacrifices all for her husband, Ikenne, only to be hugely disappointed, scorned and rejected by him. In Okoh's *Closed Doors*. We are presented with the psychological state of exploited and dejected young women suffering the hardship of male insensitivity and

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societal rejection. *Sweet Revenge* written by Slami shows a departure from this situation as she revolutionizes her heroine character, Aisossa, who deals with her husband, Sora, when he abandons her. Just like Aissaton in *Ba's So Long a Letter*, she refuses to be weighed down and depressed by this disappointment. Rather she uses it to forge a lead in life by going to school and excelling to the shock and disappointment of the husband. Although this situation finds expression in her other Play *The Queen Sister (Ubi and Ewere)*, a play which chronicles the frustration of women in a typical polygamous situation. In this predicament, the King's Iloi tries to gain the attention of the husband that is not there, feeding on each other's frustration to the point of poisoning each other. Okoh's *The Mannequins, The Mask and The Trials* where Dialely and Okoson deal terribly with their wives. These men neglect the wives cold and frustrated. The Nonetheless, they continuously remain faithful to these men. In *The Fullness of Time*, this issue is brought to the foremost forcefully. In this play the psychological and pathological denigration of women is highlighted. Dailey locks up his wife at home, systematically battering her both physically and psychologically-driving her to a state of insanity.

Some other aspects of female authored plays are populated by heroic characters. For example, there is Emotan in *Emotan: A Benin Heroine*, a woman who possessed the strength of character that is classified "legendary" especially looking into the background of the society she came from. She was able to remove the reigning Oba whom the people considered a usurper but could not do anything. Emotan, a plain woman had made a remarkable effort to achieve this feat where the great warriors had no courage to attempt. Oyedepo made a similar suggestion of the power of women when she argues in *Brain Has No Gender* that women are as much intelligent as men, which could be said to be a reply to Soyinka's assertion as such in *The Lion and the Jewel* where women are projected as simpletons. Osomo, a girl from a poor background whom had struggled through school, excels and takes all prizes in her graduation year. Prior to this, she was caught in a situation where her parents resorted to marrying her off to an eighty year old man. But then she runs away on the first night of her wedding.

Generally, most of these female dramatists have tackled certain topical contemporary issues: In *Then She Said It*, Onwueme highlights the Niger Delta crisis and the corruption through the collusion of multinational companies and their local collaborators used to commit economic crimes against the nation. In a slightly different way, Oyedepo captures this in her plays where the people are tortured by diverse problems call on by their creator to come and see. Using the *exmachina* we study the aspect of social ills posing problems to the society from poverty, hunger, unemployment, materialism, greed, injustice and other vices. Through his messenger, the creator criticizes the people for being responsible for their woes seeing that they have failed to act collectively, rather than choosing to operate like animals. Also in *Worshippers of the Naira*, Oyedepo presents where the love of money leads to betrayal, deceit, fantasy, and unscrupulousness which in her *Doom in the Dimes*, leads to destruction showing the extent people are willing to go secure it. A typification of many Nigeria men is drawn in the character of Owoeje, who sells his soul to the devil for this materials wealth. In *Alice Oh! Alice*, Oyedepo hold the enduring theme of child abuse and exploitation-an issue with alarming probations within the present dispensation so much that the government are forced to set up an agency to tackle it. Alice is used as a housemaid and a sex slave to Madam Rokeke's gain-who collects proceeds

from customers who patronizes her wicked and ill “business”, brutalizing the twelve year Alice. On the other hand, Utoh, In *The Cauldron of Death* discusses the pandemic nature of HIV/AIDS. Through one careless sexual indiscretion, the family of Ikem suffers this affliction as it passes on from father to the other members of the family. This carelessness is very much prevalent in the Nigeria society. In Okoh’s *Who Can Fight the Gods?*, it appears that the Ivory tower of education comes under the probing satellite of her pen. She exposes the moral decay, general and infrastructural collapse of a once thriving system that compared with other nations the world over (Methusala: 9).

The entire body of female drama has emerged to counter the dominant image of women in male authored works. Female dramatists all over the nation have esteemed the ethos of the women folk in their intelligent works of art. With this the latter portrayal of female characters, in a positive way by male dramatist is proof that with more participation by women in drama, the situation may change for the better.

### **Synopsis of the select plays**

The synopses of the two plays by the dramatists are to be laid out in this the research effort. This will enable us understand the story line of each of the two plays.

#### ***Wedlock of the Gods***

This is a tale of love, sacrifice, tradition, hate, vengeance, and death. *Wedlock of the Gods* treats the subject of taboo over the life of a young woman in a society engulfed in barbarous tradition. Ogwoma’s happiness lies in her love with Uloko but this happiness had undergone a sudden metamorphosis as her parents uses her as bait for money to save the life of her brother, their only son. This is not well taken by Ogwoma but her sex in the construct of the society denies her the will and power of going contrary to this betrothal - Ogwoma is forced into a marriage with Adigwu. Everybody is aware of their unhappy marriage but sets out indifferently towards the situation. Untimely, Adigwu passes away. His death is mysterious and places suspicion in the mind of his mother, Odibie. Odibie whom is Ogwoma’s mother-in-law had never liked Ogwoma and for his has every reason to doubt Ogwoma’s innocence over her son’s death. She searches for proof to show that Ogwoma had killed Adigwu, as well as having an opportunity to average the supposed murder of her son. In the course of action, Ogwoma ignores the accustomed view that stipulates that a woman in morning must stay clear of any engagement with any other man for a particular amount of time-precisely three months. Ogwoma nulls this societal apocryphal norm by continuing her relationship with Uloko, inviting on herself the strong criticism and possible chastisement for disobeying the “law of the gods”. Nonetheless, Ogwoma is bent on making her affair with Uloko successful against all odds. Parents, friends, neighbours, and relatives advise Ogwoma and Uloko to deviate from their unaccepted affair so as to avoid incurring the wrath of the gods. The stubborn nature of both loves won’t heed this. Ogwoma and Uloko soon meet doom as Odibie uses witchcraft to terminate their lives. Even in the presence of multifarious forces against their unity, and even in death, Ogwoma and Uloko’s love never dies.

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***The Reign of Wazobia***

The overwhelming issues engrossed in this text are power, patriarchy, oppression, tradition, sex segregation and self esteem. The story is rooted to the intoxication of power in a society where total power is granted to men only. *The Reign of Wazobia* takes shape in the character of Wazobia, a woman who has been made king-surrogate of Ilaa Kingdom, to the surprise of many, if not all. The entry of Wazobia as King-surrogate had set the seats of the men on fire, giving them, the sort of challenge they never thought they would see in their time. The affairs of the kingdom that had been operated solely by the men is now being generalized system which power and importance is given to men, leaving women in subordination. The women in this kingdom are subjected to dance, even naked, to the entertainment of men-feeding their eyes and satisfying their pleasures, which is being camouflaged and disguised as a traditional ritual. Wazobia fights to debunk this barbaric tradition decreeing for education for all men, women, and children. Wazobia who fights for the liberation of women is even endangered by some of them, paving way for her to be disposed in this fight. Anehe and Wa, two of the most senior Queens of the late King are being envious of Wazobia's rise to power, and so joins forces with some of the chiefs in the kingdom to bring her down from the throne. With the aid and support of the other women in the Kingdom, including two of the younger Queens of the late King-Bia and Zo, Wazobia triumphs over the forces against the liberation of the women.

**Women in the select plays**

Several issues surrounding the characters built in the dramas of Tess Onwueme and Zulu Sofola are designed with issues of education, economic empowerment, sexual oppression, inheritance customs, and widowhood rites. Modern playwrights endeavor to extract from their past and present societies, aspects that showcase the woman in her present state and what she is expected to be. This analysis is to assess the strong and weak women as well as the brave woman, the objectified woman, the envious woman, the villainous woman, and the enlightened woman.

**The Rebellious Woman**

The rebellious woman is that who knows her right in the face of the patriarchal society. She is not easily bullied around by male ego and power. She stands on her feet and fights back the ill treatment given to her by men in the society. The rebellious woman in this context is portrayed in two forms: courageous and educated.

**Courage Woman**

Sarah Peterson, a South African scholar says courage is an attribute that is often undervalued. This is the case of Ogwoma in *Wedlock of the Gods*. The two plays under study here showcase women with traits of courage, bravery, and intelligence. Both Ogwoma and Wazobia in *Wedlock of the Gods* and *The Reign of Wazobia* respectively, possess such traits. Assessing these women from their manner of speech and action, one can tell of the courage they harbour within their hearts and minds. Ogwoma is a young woman who goes against tradition, and aware of the implications, continues her fight for freedom against all odds. Her courage is revealed when she

faces several forces from different angles converging against her desire to remain in the arms of the man she loves. Despite being alone with Uloko in this struggle against the multitude, she still holds up well under the pressure. Until her demise, Ogwoma never gave up the fight for her love and happiness. Ogwoma is characterized with affirmation for she never gave up her fight and stays, head up high. Ogwoman is determined and does not lose her head over the shame people around her had painted her with. In Udo's line in Act II scene I, we observed the truth of Ogwoma's courage being unmasked.

Strong-willed. Many of us have often wondered  
Why she did not become a man (26).

It is clear with this statement that Ogwoma is a woman who will to fight a fight of justice. She is drawn with a strong spirit with which characterizes her as a courageous woman. Wazobia in *The Reign of Wazobia* is archetype to Ogwoma in character and temperament. She is as courageous, intelligent, and firm as Ogwoma is. The outstanding issue over this character is the issue of economic empowerment. According to Lynne Segal "From the very beginning...male power over women is centralized through state polices which make woman caring for others in the home financially dependent on men, as well as its being embedded in other structure of the work place and the home" (211).

In this play we are made to see the strength of a woman, not just physically but also psychologically. An intelligent mind is a powerful mind, and this is ascribed to Wazobia. She possesses this trait in words and actions speaking convincingly and persuasive in her manner of approach in different situation. Wazobia also possesses power and authority over the people around her. Initially, Wazobia was seen as an 'ordinary' young woman in her society with little or no recognition from the leading men in the kingdom. But fate had made a good turn on her, bestowing in her power and authority over many, which is a serious and delicate dexterity. According to Saint Gbilekaa, Onwueme presents powerful and active female characters that are in pursuit of social justice; this is embodied in the character of Wazobia. Max Weber, "asserts that power is an ability that enables people, individuals to actualize their personal will in a group act that is social as well as communal, against the will of others" (64). This definition can be used to define the character of Wazobia in relation to her actions in the play. Marilyn French regards power as a mobile and circulatory process. She further posits that "To have power really means to have entry to a network of relationships which one can influence people, persuade, threaten or cajole others to do what one wants or needs them to do... one does not possess power: it is granted ... by hosts of other people, and that grant is not un-retractable..."(509). This confirms the portrayal of Wazobia as a powerful woman. She influence and persuade her people towards a positive course.

### **The Knowledgeable Woman**

Knowledge can be used as a tool for women to fight ill-conceived societal norms. An educated woman is exposed an enlightened. In this section of characterization, the emphasis lies on education. Two characters from *The Reign of Wazobia* Zo and Bia attain this knowledgeable trait in character. They are the two younger Queens of the late king in the play. They are virtuous women who stand firm in support of Wazobia over the fight for women liberation. In Zo's words

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she expresses her delight in women education on the personality of Wazobia. She believes and upholds the fact that education empowers women and should be encourage. In her words:

**ZO:**...thanks to education! Wazobia too has every cause to toast her power (15). This line emphasizes thus, "Knowledge is power". Bia also acknowledges Wazobia power through enlightenment. She says, **BIA:**...but for Wazobia, you'll not be standing firm on the ground. (17)

**The Conformist Woman**

This is the weak, gullible, uneducated woman. She accepts whatever is given to her without giving a try to question cultural rites or any unfair treatment imposed on her. The conformist woman also consists of the witch, woman as a simpleton, jealous woman, and the objectified woman.

**The Jealous Wife/ Woman**

Often in our present society and even in the past women frown at the success of other women-this is a belief the researcher has on the present society. This is the situation between Wazobia and the two senior wives of the late king in *The Reign of Wazobia*, Anehe and Wa are envious of Wazobia's rise to power and authority. They exhibit their jealousy in words and action thus condemning Wazobia and even Kannebi, her mother. For the envy and dislike Anehe and Wa cultivate for Wazobia, they connive with Iyase to take her out of the throne even if leads to her death. This is something observed in the past and present day of our society. Most time, jealousy leads to deadly acts like that which is seen in this drama. A women fighting positively for the sake for other women, without a justifiable reason is a woman to be regarded as unreasonable and wicked. Such a woman can be regarded as misogynist.

**Woman as Simpleton**

The characters Nnkea, Ogoli in *Wedlock of the Gods* and Omu *The Reign of Wazobia* are still attributed with the characteristic of being a simpleton. They are seen to be weak, gullible and without a choice. Nneka for example is the mother of Ogwoma who is completely tied to tradition and is ignorant of her right to free will. She is not exposed to know that a woman has as much right to stand and speak as much as a man does. But distinctly, she supports tradition which favours the man, therefore rebukes her daughter's will of repulsing her to succumb to tradition that punishes the woman instead of giving her a fair judgment. Likewise, Ogooli, one who tries to retract Ogwoma from Uloko, her son. She also stands in unity with the others against Ogwoma and Uloko. She is highly influenced by tradition just as Nneka is. The Omu in *The Reign of Wazobia* in nature as she is at first imbibed by tradition and confronts to the maltreatment of the woman in her society. She is powerless before men and social construct thus making every other woman powerless, for she is their leader.

**The Sacrificial Lamb**

The figure of the woman as 'sacrificial lamb' is often seen in traditional settings. The play *Wedlock of Gods* hosts such figure for the woman in the character of Ogwoma is placed as

an offering to a man for material wealth in return. This offering is made by her parents to 'save' the life of their dying son. With this motive, it is obvious that the male child's welfare call for adequate attention with the negligence on the part of the parents over the female child, leaving her in absolute obvious. The male child's fortune is at the detriment of the female child. Though, Ibekwe acknowledges the unfair treatment of his daughter, everybody else in the play see nothing terrible about it. Several lines, mostly from Ogwoma emphasize the ill treatment the girl child faces towards the bargain of give- and- take between families. Ogwoma's character can be connected with the issue of widowhood right where she is denied freedom of choice of spouse.

### **Woman as an Object**

Woman being portrayed as an object is well conceived in our immediate society being constructed by men. Two characters, one each from the two plays being studied fit into this picture: Kaaniebi in *The Reign of Wazobia* is described by Anehe as a 'wretch'. Kannebia who is fifty, goes through a traumatic experience in the hands of her husband who batters her and sends her away. She is being presented as a punching bag for her husband to use in exercising his masculinity, thereby designating her as a piece of object.

**ANECHE:** a woman so wretched that her husband pounded like fufu and finally sent her away...(14). Kaaniebi can also be placed at the category of the woman as a simpleton regarding her weakness.

In the same vein, Ogwoma is treated in a paltry state even by her own parents. Despite being free from the bondage of an unhappy marriage, she is being tossed around like an object under family ties. She is as a property taken up as a man's inheritance from his late brother. This sort of marriage is known as the levirate system whereby a man dies, the brother inherits his wife. This still occurs in some societies today. This issue of inheritance customs is vividly expressed through the situation surrounding the character of Ogwoma. A similar inheritance is also seen in *The Reign of Wazobia* where Wazobia inherits the Queen of the late king after she had been named king-surrogate.

### **Conclusion**

Nature has presented life in the sense that all living creatures work and exist in pairs-each one supports the other. For proper existence, very creature needs a 'partner'. Even trees depend on good soil to aid it develop, likewise animals, and of course humans. The Nigeria female dramatists have been widely inspired by works of male dramatists and their portrayal of women in the society. Most of the female characters drawn in the plays of these female dramatists tend towards the positive direction, redesigned and elevated to a respectable status in the society, whereby, the women is admired, acknowledge, loved and glorified. They unite to place women side by side with men in terms of share-duty and account.

A new age of enlightenment for the Nigerian daughter has finally come sensitizing the women on issues relating to human existence and societal development. The hidden talents of women in Nigeria in the past have today, gone though bright revealing brilliance and décor in the minds of the Nigeria woman. The denial of education for the girl child in the society, which is a basic human right, had sunk their ability to reason properly and help contribute to nation building. But that is all in the distant past as today we celebrate the great acquisitions and

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contributions of the Nigerian female dramatists towards the uplift of the Nigeria theatre. As we all know, the woman is an integral part of the part, and the theatre as a house connotes a family. Therefore, the woman as actor, dancer, choreographer, director, dramatist, etc is intrinsically integral to the theatre. Talents have no gender neither do brains. The average Nigerian woman is multi-talented and can only showcase this if only well nurtured and trained in diverse activities. The physical strength of a man is equivalent to the psychological strength of a woman, thus, a woman is equivalent to the man. Learning never ends, and learning is studying. The researcher would love to go on and on with this study in the appraisal of the dynamic creativity of the Nigeria female dramatist.

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