

**Cultural Literacy and Educational Empowerment of Women in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Study of *Into the World*, *Nneora: An African Doll's House* and *Our Wife is not a Woman***

Ngozi Udengwu

*Department of Dramatic Arts,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria*

---

**Abstract**

Many women writers see education as a passport to women liberation and empowerment and there seems to be an equal opportunity to education for both men and women. But UNESCO statistics shows that, not only is the literacy rate higher for males, the males also form the higher workforce, and dominate professional and political positions, leaving one to wonder where women have gone with all their educational empowerment. What, perhaps, is not evident is the reason why women still lag behind in almost every meaningful life's endeavour.

This essay explores how the educational empowerment of women is undermined by their cultural mindset, resulting in a lackadaisical attitude to education and subsequent economic disempowerment. Onyeka Onyekuba's *Into the World*; Tracie Utoh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House*, and Stella Oyedepo's *Our Wife is not a Woman* offer insight into the condition under which women struggle to exercise their rights to exist. The characters in these plays represent three categories of women in the task of managing the conflict between cultural literacy and educational empowerment.

**Introduction**

Higher education for women in Nigeria was unthinkable prior to 1970. With the exception of a few girls from privileged homes, such as Lady Koforola Ademola who in 1935 became Nigeria's first female graduate, the history of formal education began with mainly male enrolment. It took a century since the establishment of the first official school in Nigeria in 1843, for the first female university graduate to emerge. However, the education reform of

1970, Universal Free primary Education (UPE), which provided educational access to all Nigerian children irrespective of sex, changed all that. It is not that women have no brain for intellectual work as Badua claims in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* [1970: 33]; today we know as Oyedepo (2001) points out that brain has no gender. Before the advent of Western education, a woman was a domestic worker, whether she was old or young, married or single, a widow or a divorcee, concubine or mistress; in her father's house, in her husband's place, in her boyfriend's house, domestic work was a woman's exclusive responsibility. She had no other recognisable duty.

To be denied education is to be denied freedom from ignorance and the opportunity to be productive and creative. Femi Osofisan [2001] states, unequivocally why the issue of literacy should be pursued passionately:

Ignorance, as all tyrants know, is the tonic of servitude. An illiterate person is easy to enslave, because he is not aware of his own hidden strengths or of other possibility in existence elsewhere around him.

He goes on bowing meekly, doing as he is told to do obediently, simply because he knows no other options. The world to him is and will always remain, just as he inherited it from his parents, and therefore happiness is nothing else but to follow, tamely in those parents' footsteps. [166]

The life of servitude, which women were subjected to made it difficult for them to embrace education early. But as men acquired more Western education and all the privileges arising from it, they also became more conscious of their humble background and of wives who were now unsuitable for their newly acquired status. This ludicrous situation of marriage between a 'civilized' Western educated African man and an illiterate 'primitive' wife became the butt of satire, both oral and written. Okot p' Bitek (1984) paints a vivid picture of the situation in his *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, which dramatize the incongruous cohabitation of the primitive and the civilized, the illiterate and the literate, the traditional and the modern. Satirists took swipes at illiterate wives who, either could not read or misread telegrams sent by their husbands from foreign countries or from the cities where they were doing their civil service jobs. The most shameful part of the condition of illiteracy of women was that they lacked the required character refinement needed to host their husbands' elite friends, or cook European dishes or speak good English, and so on. *Song of Lawino* gives a detail of all the things the educated Ocol wants but which are lacking in his illiterate wife, Lawino. It was obvious that women needed education, after all. However, their education was limited to the subjects that would help improve and increase their domestic input — domestic science, needle work, cookery

and health science — thus limiting their job opportunities, where they were lucky to be allowed to work, to teaching and nursing. Education therefore was made gender specific.

### **Education for Human Liberation**

With time, the gender specific provision in education began to be relaxed and women had more freedom to choose any area of study. The unqualified and unrestricted access to education which women now have is seen, by many women writers, as a passport to women liberation from suppression and oppression (see, for instance, Okonkwo, 1972; Okonjo, 1988; Ogbuehi, 1999, etc). The relaxation led to a steady increase in enrolment of girls in Nigerian primary and secondary schools since the 1980s. It is also responsible for women's quest for higher education, resulting in the high number of female professors being witnessed in the country in this century. In the University of Nigeria, girls are now venturing into departments that had hitherto produced only male graduates since the establishment of the university in 1960. For instance, in Mechanical Engineering in the 2008/2009 academic session, there were five girls out of a student population of about two hundred, and in Civil Engineering there was just one girl. However, the twenty first century has witnessed the highest female enrolment in schools and females graduating from the universities; there is also a concomitant increase in women occupying important posts in the workplace. It is even speculated that girls outnumber boys in school enrolment overall.

In spite of all these claims, the near absence of women in positions of power across the different sectors in the country is curiously apparent, making one wonder if education for women has actually achieved the purpose for which it was provided. In other words, has education secured the freedom and power that women hoped it would; if not, why? For answer, we turn to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics, Literacy and Non-formal Education Sector for answers. The institute published estimates and projections of adult illiteracy for populations aged 15 years and above in Nigeria, which reveal that,

1. From 1970, illiteracy level has been falling steadily, though slowly, both for men and women.
2. While illiteracy level in Nigeria is dropping slowly it is even slower for women. As at 2010 illiteracy rate became approximately 20% and 30% for men and women, respectively.
3. It is likely, from the statistics that by the year 2020 Nigeria will still not have achieved UNESCO's target of 100% literacy rate for countries.

This disparity in education is replicated in the workforce where the percentages of men and women in the workforce stand at 65% and 35%, respectively (Stock: 2006). The questions which this paper is exploring are: Why are women still educationally backward in Nigeria? Why are women not visible in significant numbers in the workplace? What are the implications of high illiteracy and unemployment rate among women? How have women contributed to their own backwardness? I intend to explore how these and other associated questions are played out in three plays by three Nigerian female playwrights: *Nneoma: An African Doll's House* by Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh; *Into the World* by Onyeka Onyekuba and *Our Wife is not a Woman* by Stella Oyedepo. These plays are accurate portrayals of various categories of women as they try to meet complex societal obligations and obstacles.

### **Cultural Literacy**

By cultural literacy is meant an awareness of cultural heritage that enables one to function well in a given culture. To be culturally literate, therefore, one does not only have to understand the cultural norms, but should also abide by them, as failure to conform to cultural norms can have dire consequences for an individual. It is worse if that individual has the misfortune of being a woman. Women are expected to endure tougher cultural conditions, especially in the mainly patriarchal cultures that exist in African societies. Though quite a number of cultural practices have relaxed on the surface, some seem to defy change especially those associated with gender role definition and gender relationship.

As has been mentioned earlier, a majority of African cultures are clearly against female independence and emancipation and women are fully aware of this and have always seen the misfortune that befalls any woman who dares to go against cultural expectations. However, education invariably leads to intellectual emancipation. Cultural literacy and educational empowerment, therefore, are counter currents and women are caught in the middle of them. The right to education that is granted to women has something sinister lurking behind it. Women fall into three groups in their effort to deal with the difficult situation and the plays chosen for study, present these groups of women. There are those who do not have education and so can be categorised simply as the traditional women; there are those who embrace education half-heartedly without any ambition for higher education or an elevated career - these are the educated traditional women; and then there is the group who acquire higher education and land very respectable jobs and strive to make their mark in the society. This last group constitute the educationally empowered women.

## The Traditional Woman in Nneora: An African Doll's House

The traditional women conform completely to the culturally defined space for women. They are uncritical of culture, believing that their intellectual and economic weakness will secure them approval and security in the society. To this group, the fate of Clara Sotubo and her recalcitrant friend, Mrs Ajala, who in the bid to exercise the freedom they believe education has provided for them, receive the greatest humiliation of their lives, will surely serve as deterrent. Zulu Sofola in *The Sweet Trap* [1977] thus sounded the warning early enough. That warning is heeded even in the twenty first century with characters such as Nneora in *Nneora: An African Doll's House* (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2005) who prefers to play along with culture and fit the role created for her by culture. Without education and without her own means of livelihood, she throws herself fully into the business of being a house wife. Almost too late, Nneora, just as her prototype, Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, soon discovers she has made a bad decision. What makes this play a twenty-first century play is that the heroine has the boldness to walk out of her toxic marriage, with a plan to pick up the pieces and move on with her life. She now decides to go to school. So many women have spent their entire lives living in denial and regretting it in the end, when it is too late to put back the clock.

Nneora is the story of a woman who is in full understanding of the position of women in the society, accepts it (or so it appears at the beginning) and lives it properly and appropriately. She is semi-literate, having dropped out of secondary school in class four because her father died and her mother became crippled. It falls on her to look after her sick mother and siblings. Being completely financially incapacitated, she has to lean on her boyfriend, Osita, a bank chairman, for financial support. Her boyfriend does not only provide the financial need of her family, but he also sets up a business for her. She has no problem acting the whore to Osita for financial reward. The boutique, which Osita establishes for Nneora, symbolises some level of economic empowerment, from which she can solve her financial problems. But she is still dependent on him. We do not see her struggle for financial independence. As a matter of fact, one gets the impression that financial independence is not her desire; from the way she readily winds the business down after her marriage, in order to become a house wife. It is not shown how competent or successful she is as a business woman. That aspect of her character is not, and this is food for thought for some feminist critics (Obioma Nnaemeka, 1993; Chikwenye Okonjo, 1988) who accuse male writers of undermining women's progress by projecting the passive traditional womanhood at the expense of their intellectual and professional competence. One can only assume that for Nneora to readily give up her business on getting

married is evidence that she attaches greater importance to marriage than to her personal advancement and development. Again the fact that she does not use the money from the boutique to complete her secondary education also shows that she is not interested in her education. Further proof that she is not interested in her education is recorded in her response to Osita who proposes to give her the financial support to finish her secondary education. Her response to that is, "I have told you, I don't want to go back to school. I have too many responsibilities and it is even a long time since I dropped out of school." [23] Being neither interested in education nor in business, both agents of empowerment, means she has chosen the path of powerlessness. Why a woman would choose weakness over power, even when she is given the opportunity to change her destiny, is the curious motivating factor in this work.

Nneora may not have education, but she is literate in cultural norms and tradition and this is what informs her choices and actions. As a culturally literate woman she knows that a woman's greatest ambition should be to get married, raise children for her husband and take care of the home. That is what culture, which is often taken to be inviolable, dictates. She affirms this when she reminds her friend, Linda, that, "We have no right to complain and we have no options. We are women and once we marry, we must stay under our men". [70] Linda has just told her how her own husband, (who by a twist of fate turns out to be Nneora's erstwhile boyfriend, the one that is now blackmailing her) Osita, mistreated her until she could not take it any more and had to move out with her children. Nneora expresses her heartfelt pity for her friend, but reminds her, anyway, that there is no option for a woman – a belief which Linda does not share any longer. Women are born and bred with this idea that a woman has no choice, and like Nneora, they grow to accept it, (not necessarily believe it) and actually live their life like people who really have no choice or even entitled to one. Marriage, for this group of women, is a cross which every good woman is expected to bear well if she is to stay out of trouble with the society and everybody she loves. Without critical reasoning, they accept marriage as a "sweet trap." It is this traditional form of marriage that Zulu Sofola had in mind when she developed that concept in her play. It is a trap because it is easier to get in than to get out. As for being sweet, the lives of the women in these plays will persuade us to the contrary. For instance, it is bitterness and not sweetness which drives Linda to leave her husband and pursue her education; bitterness almost drives Tessy mad, until she steps out to start a business of fashion designing, on the advice and support of her former classmates; bitterness also leaves mama Uduak an embittered woman, much like her counterpart in Soyinka's *Trials of Brother Jero*, Amope; it also forces the ever

docile Nneora to quit her toxic marriage to face a very bleak future; and drives Dupe to an untimely and most tragic death.

Ikenna, a lawyer by profession, never fails to remind Nneora of the inequality between them as husband and wife. After Part One, Situation One, in which Nneora is seen paying the debt a stranger owed to Mama Uduak, the next time we see her many years have elapsed and she has been married to that stranger who we now know as Ikenna. From the opening of the play it is obvious that Ikenna has no respect for Nneora, he mistrusts her and suspects her of infidelity, he hates their children because they are all girls, thinks Nneora is an idiot and extravagant. He does not think a woman should be allowed to drive a car. From the beginning he makes it clear that Nneora is just a stranger in his home. Part One, Situation Three opens with Ikenna coming home and seeing a pair of shoes which Nneora bought for him for Christmas. He quickly suspects his wife of infidelity and goes into a rage, establishing his position as the sole owner of the house, in case his wife has forgotten, as if she will ever forget something as important as that. He does not only establish ownership of the house, but of everything in it, including Nneora and all that she ever owned or will own and their children, except that they are all girls. In his fury, he screams at Nneora, "What is this shoe doing in my sitting room? Who owns it?" [29]. In one short statement Ikenna insinuates that Nneora is unfaithful and a stranger in his house. One will think that Nneora should react to these insinuations at least to show that she read the meaning. But what she says next makes it seem as if she is responding to a compliment rather than an insult. She replies, "I bought it for you. It is your Christmas present. I was planning to give it to you tomorrow." [29] Though the playwright wants us to believe that the line is delivered "*in a hurt tone*" one has a hard time deciding which word in that statement bears semblance of a speech by a person hurt. Nneora is true to her type - a virtuous woman who expresses her anger in sweet words. But that amounts to living in denial and fooling her husband, hence by the end of the play husband and wife discover that they never understood each other all these years.

### **The Educated Traditional Woman: *Into the World***

The second group of women, the educated traditional women, do not take education seriously. They show a lack of commitment to their education, drop out of school to get married, sometimes as a result of family pressure and sometimes out of choice. Even when they complete their secondary education they do not study further. Theirs is education for marriage eligibility and not for intellectual accomplishment and economic self reliance. They do not take education seriously, probably because they know it will

conflict with their domestic duties – childbearing, childrearing, cooking and housekeeping, and perhaps petty trading on the side. *Into the world* by Onyeka Onyekuba [1990] captures the mindset of this group of women who just go to school in order to be more eligible for marriage. Thus Tessy, the heroine, is not interested in making good grades because she does not need good grades to be a housewife and consumer of wealth or an “oliaku” as such women are called in Igbo. Ironically, Tessy can not even take care of the home or look after the children, and her house-help soon usurps her position in the family.

The play showcases four secondary school girls and their attitude to education as well as the factors responsible for those attitudes. While two - Monique and Mercy - take their studies seriously, aiming for high grades by studying very hard, the other two - Tessy and Patsy - choose the path of indolence. The two groups of students are responding to two opposing generational definitions of gender. Monique and Mercy subscribe to the modernist definition of gender based on gender equity and female empowerment. Thus in an effort to break the cycle of female dependence on male, and liberate themselves from economic and intellectual bondage, the two friends grab very strongly the opportunity which education offers them to be self-reliant in life. Their aim is to put their God-given talent to the greatest use in order to become the best they can be in life. Youths such as these two usually harbour big ambitions and dreams and pursue these with zeal and commitment.

On the other hand, Patsy and Tessy are not interested in studying hard and getting good grades. It is important to mention that their poor educational performance does not mean that they are unintelligent; they are simply not interested in academic excellence, because they do not think they need it to achieve their life’s dream.

Education, without a doubt, can be a source of power and authority, of freedom and self-reliance. Why would a person choose the path of ignorance and subservience? But the women in the play, it is suggested, are acting under the influence of their cultural conditioning which has taught them that a woman must be under a man to serve and be provided for by him. The culture also states that a woman who is not married is an aberration in the society. The cultural framework they work within categorically discourages female emancipation, agency and authority. It is the full recognition and acceptance of their perceived proper place in the society that is responsible for the attitude of Patsy and Tessy to education. Culturally, therefore, they are justified to eschew education and its attendant sense of power and emancipation, which in any case is not necessary for a person destined for a fringe position. Feeling so justified in their intellectual laziness, the duo have nothing but pity for the hardworking students who will eventually lose,

when it eventually dawns on them that they have gained the whole knowledge but have in the process lost their viability for marriage. Concerning their friends' commitment to education, Patsy predicts an obvious disaster for them. Referring to Monique, Patsy declares.

At this rate, by the time she comes out of her university, no man will talk to her. But for mercy, I pity her. She is... ugly is too mild, she is just repulsive. I am sure that no man will look at her. She will only read, read and read to support herself 'sha'. She will be one of the Dr. Misses we will have 'sha'.  
[14]

The above answers the question which this paper sets out to answer. Thus, the African culture, which some writers claim is gender sensitive, [Zulu Sofola 2001; Kamene Okonjo 1987; Chris Nwamuo 1993], in theory proves to keep women in perpetual bondage. A number of truths implicitly and explicitly deducible from Patsy's statement are,

- a. Men avoid intellectually and economically independent and powerful women.
- b. The most important ambition of a woman is to get married. This is very obvious in our society where the unhappiness of an unmarried woman is an open book for all to read and the poor image is seen from the way people take swipes at her at the slightest provocation. She is vulnerable and open to verbal and psychological abuse, some times, even physical abuse.
- c. A woman must look beautiful in order to be appealing to men. This explains their preoccupation with their looks, which sometimes get to an obsessive level.
- d. If a woman acquires all the education in the world but has no husband all her intellectual power is worthless. This explains why (b) above is a woman's priority.
- e. A woman must depend on a man, or at least appear so. This obviously, makes self-reliance useless for a woman. What is the point of aspiring to be self-reliant when dependence is perceived as a virtue?

The two friends know better than to deceive themselves with the idea of female emancipation, when the word "emancipation" evokes disgust in both men and women. Dependence and subservience to the male remains a highly valued virtue in women. On the other hand, equality is generally regarded as an aberration even in the modern time. A self-reliant and independent woman is often an object of controversy and suspicion. It is believed, and rightly too, that an intellectually and financially independent

woman cannot be subservience or bow to control. The idea of the modern woman within this world/culture remains to a large extent a sham and a façade. A woman is allowed to move up the intellectual ladder only if she carries with it her traditional role and exhibit the culturally prescribed behaviours. Thus, women who succeed in acquiring some self-reliance have a difficult time keeping up with it. One such woman is Dupe, the heroine of Stella Oyedepo's *Our Wife is not a Woman*.

### **The Educationally Empowered Woman: *Our Wife is not a Woman***

*Our Wife is not a Woman* is the story of an educated senior civil servant with a sophisticated lifestyle. Her husband, Kola, is also a senior civil servant, and both are known to be in love. But the tension in the marriage is established from the opening of the play. Kola comes into the sitting-room from the bathroom combing his hair and Dupe asks him to finish combing in the bathroom because it is unseemly to have hair flying about the whole place. Kola thinks Dupe is being unnecessarily "finicky" and reminds her that she has not washed his singlet, shirts and under wears, lately. He complains that he does not like the way she does things in the house. It is part of her wifely duties to see that his clothes are clean, and that, in fact, his secretary once observed that his trousers was torn at a very embarrassing area. [4] If she cannot wash them herself she can at least ask someone to do it. He defines the role of a wife saying,

Look, I would love my wife to see to such things. I would want her to personally see to what I eat and wear. If she doesn't, it amounts to negligence of duty. [3]

The interesting thing about this state of affairs is that women are always aware of their defined roles, but they often hope to be treated differently when they have achieved some recognition. They expect to be accorded some respect when they have achieved important heights and they feel belittled when this does not happen. They feel cheated and abused when they share the financial burden with their husbands and the latter do not share the domestic burden with them in return. Thus Dupe expects her husband to understand that as a working woman, a senior civil servant at that, she is too busy to border about a husband's dirty underwear, shirts and torn trousers. But men do not figure such things out, and in any case they do not have to for, what will marriage be if the woman does not serve and respect her husband. Thus Kola warns Dupe not to be "swollen headed" because, even though they have equal educational status, she shouldn't forget that no woman is above her husband no matter the circumstance. It

does not matter that Dupe shares with him the role of provider, which is culturally assigned to men. Dupe prods him to reason saying, "You have never for once given consideration to the fact that I'm as financially committed to the upkeep of this home as you are. In fact, I should say more committed." [5] It is not that Kola is not considerate; he is intelligent and thoughtful, at least his reply shows him to be so when he says, "What is strange in that? If you earn as much as I do, it is only fair that you contribute as much."

Dupe appears to be doing well in the argument until the debate shifts to the main issue – childlessness – and she breaks down and cries to bring Act I Scene I to an end. The turbulence that characterizes the marriage is thus exposed very early in the play, foreshadowing an inevitable catastrophic end. And that is as far as women emancipation goes. Educated women argue about everything but when it comes to childlessness they feel guilty as charged. A marriage riddled with bickering over trivialities with hot words flying like missiles and tension stretching to breaking point, is hardly a conducive environment for intellectual development and emotional stability. But women rarely quit a toxic marriage. Dupe probably thinks, as many women do rightly or wrongly, that having a child will make a difference in the way her husband treats her. But, of course, as Dupe herself knows, a childless woman is "living on borrowed time." [7] And this is Dupe's fate as her husband turns polygamist in Act III, thanks to his mother. All the while they have been having problems, Dupe blames mama, her mother-in-law, but it soon dawns on her that, in spite of his denials, Kola in fact welcomes the second wife arrangement. He probably had always wanted it, but leaves his mother to do the dirty job. Left alone in the cold and feeling betrayed by the one person that should act as her anchor, Dupe takes her life.

Education and self-reliance are not able to secure freedom and happiness for her and for many other women out there in the real world. The demise of Dupe also raises a salient point that needs further clarification. Can a woman really claim to be independent when she cannot take care of herself? As soon as she loses her husband to an illiterate village girl, who is not even a woman, Dupe ends her life. Thus, in spite of her intellectual sophistication and financial freedom, Dupe still wallows in the traditional guilt of childlessness and is doomed by it, in the same way it did illiterate women in other works of literature. Dupe represents the educationally empowered women whose elevation, rather than earn them liberation and greater stability, make their fall even harder. They still fall victims to cultural norms, thereby challenging Okonkwo's (1975) claim that Ihuoma and Anowa could have handled their childlessness better if they had had the opportunity to acquire quality education. In the final analysis, education, it seems, makes women's lives more complicated and difficult.

## Cultural Literacy as an Obstacle to Women's Educational Empowerment

It needs to be pointed out here that it is not culture per se that is to blame for the backwardness of women in literacy and career advancement, but the tenacious hold on to cultural norms that no longer serve good purposes. Thus, both men and woman are equally to blame.

Let us look at how cultural literacy plays a key role in the lives of the female characters studied in the three plays. Nneora does not want to go back to school because she knows that marriage will elude her if she does. She decides instead to get married. Her decision is correct, culturally speaking. But from a modernist point of view, it is foolishness. But modernity and traditionalism are in constant struggle in our society. It is therefore a matter of choice between the two, and Nneora chooses tradition. She thinks that conformity with the culture's tradition of marriage will secure her happiness. She is disappointed in the end, when she realises that in spite of her selfless services to her husband, he treats her as a stranger. She quits the marriage to take up from where she left off schooling. Tradition having failed her, she wants to try educational empowerment. Ironically, her friend, Linda, who earlier quit her abusive marriage and goes to America to study and becomes a lawyer, has come back looking for her husband. It is not clear however what compels her to come back. She tells her friend that her husband has shown some change of heart and has begged her to come back. But we know that her husband would have been married to Nneora had the latter accepted his proposal. It is likely that she feels that with her law degree she is better equipped to handle her abusive husband.

The third group are those women who honestly make the best of the opportunity they have to go to school and come out successfully. Obviously, the smallest percentage of women belongs to this group. Their success opens them up to a different kind of problem. Often, an unstable home is the prize women pay for intellectual success, unless, of course, one is fortunate to have a supportive husband who fills in the gap created by the demands of the woman's outside responsibilities.

The major issue in *Our Wife is not a Woman* is childlessness. One would think that as an educated and self-reliant woman, Dupe would have risen above the bondage of cultural literacy. Education is expected to bring the required solution to women's problems. But we find out that in most cases it fails, because the women themselves feel helpless under the yoke of culture. They, therefore, appear to be willing accomplices in their own oppression. Dupe is an educated woman and a senior civil servant; hers, one can say, is an elite family. She contributes her quota towards the upkeep of her home as well as taking care of her husband's extended family members. But she has

been married for five years without a child, which is a serious marital problem. A woman is married, primarily, to bear children for her husband. What worries one in Dupe's case is that five years is not enough time to conclude that she cannot have children given the educational level of both her and her husband.

## **Conclusion**

In the preceding pages I tried to investigate the reasons for the slow development of women in spite of the fact that all the chains that hold them back from developing their full potential have been lifted and the fact that they have been declared free to pursue their dreams. UNESCO statistics is cited to reveal that not only are women still largely illiterate, they are also nearly absent from meaningful jobs and careers. Three plays written by women were chosen for this essay; however, they were chosen not because they are written by women but because they present different attitudes of women toward education and self reliance. The study revealed three groups of women with regards to attitudes to education and self reliance. In *Nneora*, we find one group that eschew education and self-reliance in order to enable them function as traditional wife and mother. When they are in townships they form the bulk of market women and domestic house help. We also have another group who are not actually illiterates but are more committed to the traditional place of women than to educational empowerment. Because they do not think a woman really needs empowerment, they show no commitment to their education and quickly drop out at the slightest opportunity, such as marriage, and have no zeal to go back to school.

The high illiteracy rate among women with its attendant low earning power motivated this research. The research aim, therefore, is to discover the possible reason or reasons for this phenomenon. The need for this investigation arises out of curiosity to know why women are not taking advantage of their right to equal opportunity to education and choice of profession. The question for which we seek an answer in this paper is: for those women who have exercised this right, what have they done with their education? For the answer we looked at three plays written by women. The plays reveal the underlying reason behind women's continued backwardness in literacy and economic development, some of them are:

- a. Domestic chores are most often exclusive duty of female members of the family. Without equitable sharing of domestic work, the burden of domestic duties falls squarely on the woman's shoulders, leaving her little or no time and strength for intellectual and career activities. Dupe represents career women who are expected to juggle career

- with domestic chores, even the most trivial like washing her husband's clothes.
- b. Fear of not getting married interferes with a girl's commitment to education. Women have been culturally conditioned to often believe that the best thing that will happen to them is to get married and have children. Literate or illiterate, therefore, many women will sacrifice anything to get married and avoid the stigma of spinsterhood. Sometimes their desperation to get married is both scandalous and pathetic. All the women in the three plays are either married or planning to get married and they are all preoccupied with marital problems, none is worried about career or professional matters.
  - c. The domestic place of women informs their lukewarm attitude to high intellectual and economic independence. Nneora denies herself access to education and even closes her boutique in order to be a good wife to Ikenna. Linda drops out of secondary school to get married to Osita. Tessy allows herself to be distracted from her education.
  - d. Self-reliant or dependent, none of the heroines in these plays achieved satisfaction in their marriage. Nneora has to walk out on her marriage, so does Linda at first; Tessy's marriage is turbulent. Dupe dies of heartbreak.
  - e. The low educational development of women, as well as the high unemployment rate among them which this paper investigates, are further substantiated in the three plays. Out of the twenty-three women in the plays, only eight have some level of education – Dupe, Mrs. Chukwu, Mrs. Ishola and Shade in *Our Wife*; Mercy, Monique and Mrs. Demi (their teacher) in *Into the World*; Linda in Nneora got her education on second chance. Of the eight presumed educated women, only three are university graduates. A vast majority of these female characters are illiterate, and the few that have education are engaged in marital issues rather than career or political matters.

The point has to be made, at the risk of being controversial, that women are largely responsible for their own backwardness and they are the ones to change their condition, positively. Culture is made for people and not people for culture. Culture is meant to serve the needs of people and this is why it is said to be dynamic. Many cultural practices have changed and more are still changing. If the fringe position of women in the society does not change, it is because women allow it. It is the duty of women organisations and women councils to mobilise women to claim their rights to self development. Playwrights could help a lot, especially female playwrights, to ginger and encourage women to wake up, by developing female characters struggling and achieving intellectual and career successes. There are models in

the real society to emulate. Though they are few and far apart at the moment, their story can be used to motivate other women. All in all, the twenty-first century promises to be more rewarding to women than the past centuries. Women have acquired some measure of boldness to reject cultural norms that militate against their progress in life. The world is moving very fast and women must be part of it.

### **Works Cited**

Acholonu Catherine Obianuju (2002), *Africa the New Frontier: Towards a Truly Global Literary Theory for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Owerri: AFA Publications.

Aidoo, Ama Ata (1983), *Anowa*, London: Longman Drumbeat.

'Bitek, Okot (1984), *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*, London and Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd

Evans, HGJ (1975), *Culture and Civilization*, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.

Evwierhoma, Mabel I. E (2005), "The Travails of Feminine Inaction and Womanhood" in Bode Osanyin's *Woman in Nigerian Theatre Journal: A Journal of the Society for Nigerian Theatre Artists* vol. 8 no 1. 52-60

Chizea, Dora Obi and Njoku, Juliet, eds. (1991), *Nigerian Women and the Challenges of Our Time*, Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited.

Ezenwanebe, Osita (2005), "The Representation of Women in Nigerian Theatre: An Issue in Theatre Development" in *Nigerian Theatre Journal: A Journal of the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists* vol.8, no 1. 61-74

Ogbuehi, C.U (1999), "Women, Literature and Empowerment" in *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities* No. 10, June 42-53

Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo (1988), "Women and Nigerian Literature" in

*Perspectives in Nigerian Literature from 1700-Present*, Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed.) Nigeria: Guardian Book Publications Limited. Vol.1:60-67.

Okonkwo, Juliet (1975), "Talented Women in African Literature" in *Africa Quarterly* Volume XV, Numbers 1&2: 36-47.

Onyekuba, Onyeka (1990), *Into the World*. Obosi: Pacific Publishers.

- Osofisan, Femi (2001), *Literature and the Pressures of Freedom: Essays, Speeches and Songs*, Ibadan: CentreSTAGE-AFRICA.
- Oyedepo, Stella (2004) *Our Wife is not a Woman*. Abuja: Lovgo Publications (Nigeria) Limited.
- Oyedepo, Stella (2001), *Brain has no Gender*, Ilorin: Delstar Publishers.
- Salami, Irene Isoken (2004), *Sweet Revenge*, Ibadan: Saniez Publications.
- Sani, Hajo (2001) *Women and National Development: The Way Forward*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.
- Sofola, Zulu (1977), *The Sweet Trap*, Ibadan: Evans Publishers.
- Stock, Robert (2006), *Nigeria, Microsoft<sup>(R)</sup> 2007 [CD]*, Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation
- UNESCO (2002, Institute for Statistics, *Literacy and Non-Formal Education Sector Estimates and Projections of Adult Illiteracy for Population ages 15 years and above, by country*.
- Utoh-Ezeajugh, Tracie Chima (2005), *Nneora: An African Doll's House*. Awka: Valid Publishing Company (Nig) Limited
- Yakubu, Udu. ed., (2002), "The Dialectics of Culture and Development, Special Focus on Nigeria" in *The Journal of Cultural Studies*. Vol. 4, no.1, Ago-Iwoye: African Cultural Initiatives, Olabisi Onabanjo University.