

Introduction: Whose Theatre? Women in Nigeria Theatre

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Women's issues have formed the focus of intense debate since the turn of the twentieth century and the conditions of women in Nigeria and Africa have changed in direct response to all the socio-political and economic changes in the world. Before this period, the undoubtedly immense regional and national contributions made by Nigerian and African women to the socio-cultural, educational and economic developments that have shaped Africa and the African diaspora were rarely acknowledged, even in the instances where their political involvements were widely known and documented, such as their contributions in anti-colonial struggles for national independence and in the socio-cultural developments soon after, their actions have been greeted with little fanfare. Writers and political commentators, especially men, have at best treated African women's roles and positions in private and public *spaces* as incidentals often relegated to the footnotes of history (see Acholonu 1995; Chivandikwa, Mhako – Mutonhodza, and Sambo 2010; Ewrierhoma 2002; Ukaegbu 2007a, etc) and have historically viewed their activities through a reductive, homogenised patriarchal gaze that casts them in secondary and supportive roles to men, essentially as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers and mothers-in-law, instead of as individuals with all the abilities, potentials and creativities historically associated with and reserved for men (Amadiume 1989; Nnaemeka 1998).

While mythology, folklore, history, patriarchy and an array of ritual and social constructs, sexuality and gender roles have been used to explain the unflattering representation and near invisibility of women from some literary tropes (Chafetz 1979; Azodo and Eke 2007), the resulting manufactured, constructed images of happy domesticity, cultural and political apathy and unquestioned commitment to family and collective

determinism are nothing but myths that for long, succeeded mainly to homogenise women in Africa whilst freeing men to occupy public spaces unchallenged. That the early writers in Africa, men and women, indigenous and foreign, bought into this homogenising pseudo-normative narrative from pre-colonial to early postcolonial periods, has been a double blow on the images of women in Africa. Historically, this reductive, overwhelmingly gendered cultural representation is irrespective of the important roles that women in Africa have generally played in domestic and public settings as we see in the examples from Nigeria at least, of Ahebi Ugbabe of Enugu-Ezike in Northern Igboland in colonial Nigeria whose economic and political exploits and astuteness reveals a highly liberated woman in a very patriarchal society dwarfed men in her territory and neighbouring communities which Nwando Achebe has immortalised in *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe* (2011).

The roll-call of Nigerian women from history and folklore who have made it into legendary stature is long and include Emotan of Benin kingdom during the reign of Oba Uwaifiokun in the fifteenth century (Omoregie 1972), Moremi of Ile-Ife (Yoruba kingdom) whose imagination, fearlessness in the face of internal helplessness from external threats from the Igbo (Ross 1998) and intelligence were hitherto unheard of or associated with women as demonstrated by Femi Osofisan in *Morountodun* (1982) and Queen Amina (Aminatu) of Zaria whose political sway and military might covered the original seven Hausa kingdoms of Katsina, Daura, Kano, Zazzau, Gobir, Rano, and Garun Gabas in the sixteenth century. Like Ahebi Ugbabe, Queen Amina built a strong economic and political kingdom that became the prototype for later Hausa states. The exploits of these women no doubt continued and spawned public politics-defining incidents as the Aba women's riot of 1929 (Falola and Paddock 2011, Nina Mba 1992), itself a stimulus that galvanised women's involvement in the fight against British colonialism in Nigeria. The list of the more modern counterparts of these legendary figures is far longer, but like their predecessors whose exploits are often historicised and have since become the subjects of theatre and different forms of performance writing, heroic modern women like Efunsetan Aniwura, Madam Tinubu, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Margaret Ekpo have fared worse and earned less critical mileage.

Despite these writings about them, Nigerian and African women, past and contemporary, legendary or real, have been insufficiently acknowledged, written up and treated as the centre-piece of historical works. Women's voices were muffled or muted into echoing the mantra of biologically defined, men-sanctioned social constructions of women. Sadly, Nigeria and, in deed, Africa's legendary heroic women generally

fared less than their men counterparts with whom they shared and dominated the political and educational sphere. Even theatre, which rightly ought to and has often claimed to align itself with the conditions of what is undoubtedly the majority of the population (see Chabulikazi 1978; Chinweizu 1984; Achebe, 2013) -when the number of similarly marginalised youth is included - did not for a long time interrogate women's concerns as it should. This was because men playwrights spoke for women and even so, not with the aim of liberating women from cultural constraints but to render to them, belated grudging recognition and thus using their plays to define as well as to perpetuate the unevenness of the space for men-women/gender discourse. This was until women novelists such as Flora Nwapa (*Efuru* 1966), Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1966), Buchi Emecheta (1979), Mariama Ba of Senegal in the novel *So Long a Letter* (1981) and Susheila Nasta (1992), and playwrights such as 'Zulu Sofola in Nigeria (with *The Sweet Trap* 1978), Efua Sutherland in Ghana (with *The Marriage of Anansewa* 1988) began the challenging task of extricating women's voices from male control and gaze.

These early writings echoed some of the then prevalent penchant for un-problematized endings in which women surrendered cultural and political spaces to men as happens with Mrs Sotubo and Mrs Ajala in *The Sweet Trap*, Anansewa and Christie in *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Moremi in Osofisan's *Morountodun* and Ramatoulaye in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. (Ukaegbu 2006, 2007a) Contrary to expectations, all the leading women in the named plays and novel, after exposing the imbalance in the social systems and the heavy-handed discriminations against women, return willy-nilly to subscribing to men's prescriptions on grounds of mores, the unnecessary mythologization of women and their definition and classification on the basis of their roles in social and public spheres. However the writings by the likes of Ifi Amadiume (1989), Catherine Acholonu (1993), and arguably, especially Tess Onwueme in such plays as *The Broken Calabash* (1984) *Ban Empty Barn* (1986), *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), and *Legacies* (1989) recognise that such patriarchal constructions of women are nothing short of gender categorization and in response, have provided sufficiently robust dramatic and literary counter-narratives and discourse to challenge the long dominant *status quo* and to carve out the literary space that more recent women playwrights such as Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Osita Ezenwanebe, Julie Okoh, Stella Oyedepo, Onyeka Onyekuba, Charity Angya, Chinyere Okafor, and many more of the womanist/feminist playwriting persuasion (for want of a better term) have capitalised on to expand Nigeria and Africa's theatrical and dramaturgical spaces. These women writers as it were, realised the dangers in historically conservative narratives propped up

with mythology and male constructed stereotypes of women and so share with Sue-Ellen Case (1988), the need to contest such images in which 'the form of the narrative itself is complicit with the psycho-cultural repression of women' (cited in Gibson 1993, 8).

This is not to say that the battle for equality has been won by women, however, it is certainly no longer waged on terms set by men alone, a fact that male critics and commentators on women playwrights and plays such as Alex Asigbo (2002), Olu Obafemi (1988), Chris Dunton (1995, 2002) and Barclays Ayakoroma in *Dance on His Grave* (2002) have waded into. With the growing interest in women and gender issues and the active involvement of men, it is too early in the day to evaluate the effect and direction of women in Nigerian theatre but suffice it to state that one of the outcomes has been the unprecedented growth in the number of women playwrights, the number of plays about women and those in which women have vacated their once 'hallowed' seats in the periphery for centre-stage, de-stabilising and re-configuring the spaces for gender and social drama. Thus the field of social drama (not in the Turner's and Schechner's senses with regard to indigenous socio-sacral performances (Ukaegbu, 2007b) in Nigeria has also grown and further diversified the thematic concerns and subjects of contemporary Nigerian drama. So also have discussions gone beyond gender imbalance towards interrogating the various ramifications of gender relations or to what Ferris would describe as the transition from 'the relations of men with women' to what is undoubtedly a more objective and more balanced transaction; 'the relations of men and women' (Ferris 1990, 131). While Nigerian theatre and women in theatre have been the greatest beneficiaries, the same impulse to use drama and the stage to document the contributions of women to society and their developments as individuals and part of fast evolving and changing societies has spread, like Nollywood, all over Africa. These are just some of the reasons why this edition of *African Performance Review (APR)* has been specifically dedicated to 'Women in Nigeria Theatre'.

This expansion of the theatre space in Nigeria and Africa has not only freed women voices far more than at any other time in Nigeria and Africa's turbulent histories, women playwright and women's concerns have come to the fore much more in the early part of the twenty-first century. This is to the extent that women in theatre and drama, as writers, directors, designers, dramaturges and as critics have grown exponentially on the continent and more so in Nigeria where the combination of educational and social developments and globalisation have helped to fragment formerly dominant narratives about gender, sexuality, roles and responsibilities and where the growing cults of individualism and

consumerism have fragmented the collective frame that men have always misappropriated for their own ends.

How have these changing roles of women in society been represented in writing is the question that drives this special edition of *African Performance Review*. The rationale behind this special issue is the desire to direct attention to issues relating to women literary output both as objects of creative writing and creative writers themselves. It is ironic and at the same time interesting that out of the seven articles in this issue of the journal, three are written by women. Again, the play texts studied here are written by both men and women. This promises to be a balanced study of the relations of men and women (Ferris, 1990). The volume is dedicated to finding out how things have changed for women. As many as twenty or more plays and one novel, written by both males and females in both English and Igbo languages are studied in this special issue giving a wide spectrum of investigation of current gender situation in Nigerian writing. The inquest into how women have fared is far more complex and requires a closer look at the states of the socio-economic and cultural landscapes that produced the marginalisation of women in the first instance. Each essay has approached this task differently and contextually but taken together, they unearth a field that has not only changed beyond recognition when compared to the mid-1980s up to the 1990s but some of the important developments that have re-vitalised Nigerian and African theatres in the quality of creative output and in the rigour and scope of criticism; these two developments will hopefully bode well in the further development of Nollywood and the home video industries.

Ever since the debate on women's representation in literature began, critics have often observed a disparity in the representation of male and female characters in which the males are almost always presented as financially and intellectually independent, as well as politically powerful while women are often presented as dependent and powerless. With large scale empowerment programme for women in recent times, it is logical to enquire into how these changes have impacted on the status of women in literary representation. In her article, "Performing Freedom: Strategies of Gender Balancing in Modern African Writing", Osita Ezenwanebe revisits gender imbalance with a view to examine the strategies of female emancipation as employed by playwrights and to ascertain the effectiveness of these strategies. To do this she has selected two plays: *Sweet Revenge* by Irene Salami (a female playwright) and *Dance on His Grave* by Barclays Ayakoroma (a male playwright). She deciphers each playwright's opinion on how women should respond to gender based injustices in the society. In other words, how does gender affect meaning creation, agency and identity?

Femi Osofisan is one of few African male writers known to have developed at thematic and dramaturgical levels, strategies such as myth, revolutionary aesthetics, selfless, intelligent and brave heroines juxtaposed with self-seeking opportunistic men as in *Morountodun*. *The Women of Owu*, *Tegonni* and *The Chattering and the Song* to initiate as well as interrogate gender imbalance in his writings. Because of the apparent gender balance in his plays some critics feel justified to describe him as a “feminist” writer (Shelton & Shelton eds. 1996; Awodiya 1988). In his article, “Femi-Nism: Woman as Narrative Ligament in Femi Osofisan’s Plays”, Ndubuisi Nnanna discloses that Osofisan’s sense of social justice does not just end in creating strong female characters, but that he in fact employs women as structural pillars in a good number of his plays. The writer selects four of Osofisan’s plays – *Red is the Freedom Road*, *Morountodun*, *Farewell to a Cannibal Rage*, and *Many Colours Make the Thunder King* – to illustrate his point. This article is particularly interesting for its new and refreshing approach to the discourse on the role of women in literary representation, which the author himself captures in this statement of purpose,

This paper, beyond the presentation of images, examines the structural roles played by some female characters in ... It will not lament partial authorial treatment of femaleness/femininity, particularly with regard to questions and images of domesticity, sentimentality, debasement and evasiveness. Instead, it will depart from the illusion of absence to the reality of presence not as binary oppositions that define worth, but as narrative devices.

A lot of indigenous language literatures are underutilised by international readership because the language in which they are written is inaccessible to majority of readers. However, when critical reviews of such works are written in English, more people get to know about them and discover their unique qualities. This is what Samuel Ikeokwu has done with his article, “Non-literary Mode of Communicating Gender Differences in Igbo Plays”, in which the writer explores the use of non-literary cues in communicating gender differences. His argument seems to corroborate what Lizbeth Goodman (1996) describes as ‘gender in agenda’ in which she demonstrates that the gender of writers is discernible in their work from the symbols and objects they select to advance their narrative. Four Igbo language plays are studied in this work, and again they include plays by both male and female playwrights. The plays include Chukuezi’s *Udo Ka Mma* (Peace is Better), Onyekonwu’s *Nwata Rie Awọ* (When a Child Eats the Toad...), Nwaozuzu’s *Nke M Ji Ka* (What I

Have at Hand...) and Akoma's *Obidiya* (Her Husband's Soul-mate). Adopting a communicative act analysis approach, the author analyses some dramatic devices such as movements, actions and stage props commonly used by the named Igbo playwrights to realize effective meaning in dramatic performances, and discovers that the nature of the roles played by female characters determine the non-literary communication mode ascribed to them within the play-texts, a situation that depending on the director, could be dramatized differently.

Northern Nigeria and a lot of Islamic North Africa are areas that have not been given adequate scholarly and critical attention, consequently not enough is known about the dramatic/literary activities and theatre going on there. This is the import of Abubakar Liman's contribution to this special edition, with his article entitled "The Paradox of Gender Discourse in Rural-Urban Spaces of Postcolonial Northern Nigeria: The Case of Zaynab Alkali's *The Initiates*". Liman's is the only work devoted to the study of a novel, and in it he selects one of the few most prominent female writers in Northern Nigeria, Zaynab Alkali. After a close study of Alkali's latest novel, *The Initiates*, the author observes with shock that the Northern female novelist, who had been praised for her bravery in rescuing women from the fringe and exposing their mistreatment in her earlier novels, has backslid into ambivalence in her latest novel. The article shows how and why this happened. The situation analysed by Liman may be particular to the novel right now but it raises questions about the safety of the space women have secured in drama and playwriting, especially as this was once the bastion and preserve of men and patriarchy is an institution known more for its autocracy than for its democratic propensities. This is a space worth watching as male critics take on women playwrights as Ayakoroma does in *Dance on his Grave* (2002).

The article titled "Nigerian Female Playwrights and the Evolution of a Literary Style: Gendered Discuss in the Plays of Onwueme, Salami-Agunloye and Utoh-Ezeajugh", written by Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, is a bold attempt to trace the emergence of women in the field of playwriting in Nigeria. In this study of over ten plays written by Nigerian women, the author traces the shifts in the thematic contents of these women's plays from the stage of protests through the various stages in the exposition of oppressive agencies in the society to the stage of advocacy for female emancipation. In "To Sack a City or to Breach a Woman's Chastity: Euripides' *Trojan Women* and Osofisan's *Women of Owu*", Olakunbi Olasope studies the impact of war on women and how women have contributed to wars, in the first place. Beyond that, and hinged on Classical and Gender frameworks, the paper investigates the link between fact and fiction, drama and reality as well as the influence of classical Greece on

African drama. It offers a variety of perspectives on the issues raised by the two plays as well as the historical reality of war and the victimisation of women across cultures and throughout history. It is basically a comparative study of history of war, the roles and impacts on women and its dramatic reconstruction in Classical Greek and Yoruba dramatic cultures.

Taken together, the essays here address the issue of women in Nigerian theatre, whether as dramatists or as characters in plays and what emerges is the fact that the time of female marginalisation and their silencing under patriarchy is now in the past and that women as fictional characters or as real life dramatists and theatre makers have grasped the medium of drama and are using it vigorously to place issues concerning women at the centre of discourse within the socio-cultural-historical context of Nigeria; and women are no longer 'written out, written over' or made invisible in the various domains of representation.

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