

Performing Freedom: Strategies of Gender Balancing in Modern African Writing

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Abstract

Modern African dramatic writing captures the imbalance in the relationship of man and woman in modern society. The social role of provider and defender assigned to men in traditional society places them at the centre of life where they wield unlimited power in public and private life, a power that consigns women to the periphery in subservience, powerlessness and silence. With advancements in modern society, education and political democracy enable women to fight against this obvious imbalance in gender relation. Right from the beginning of human society, women have used different strategies in a battle for self-definition, self-determination and relevance. While many scholars and critics are unanimous in repudiating the imbalance as oppressive, there are discordant views as to what should be women's response to all forms of gender-based injustice.

This paper examines different methods, traditional and modern, employed by female characters in African plays to challenge the oppressive imbalance in gender relation as well as the playwrights' attitudes to the choices made by women which not only determine the tone of dramatic texts and the mood of their performances, but also the meaning of the plays as well as audience responses.

The plays of two Nigerian playwrights, Irene Isoken Salami's *Sweet Revenge* (2004) and Barclays Ayakoroma's *Dance on his Grave* (2002) are used as points of references to other African writings that recreate the strategies for women's emancipation from oppressive gender relation. The study evaluates the different weapons of gender war employed by female and male characters in the plays under study and the playwrights' attitude to the characters and the cause they fight.

Introduction: Theatre and Gender Imbalance in Modern African Writing

Nigeria and Africa in general, like Great Britain, have been relatively conservative in self criticism, especially the criticism of its cultural traditions. Great Britain, however, is a peculiar case. British 19th century conservatism was anchored on the high level of conformism inspired by the spirit of patriotism built over the long years of the country's imperial power. Traditionalism, elevated as a form of religion, stifled any attempt at social criticism. The aversion to social criticism was compounded by the fact that the secular and the divine (spiritual or religious) offices were merged, making any attack on leaders and social institutions an act of sacrilege.¹ Hugh Hunt is right when he observes that a conformist society, like Victorian England, is not "anxious to have the cracks and weaknesses of its structure exposed upon the stage" (1978: 6). Consequently, the theatre of the time tried to insulate the society from the stage.

In Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, the long years of British colonial rule provided a rallying point for a sympathetic, patriotic stance in the discourse of African society and cultures. The devastating effects of colonialism, its denigration of African cultures followed by the aping of Western culture by early African elites and a wide-spread repudiation of African cultures awakened nostalgia among early African creative artists as captured in the literary ideology of *Négritude*. The term *Négritude*, as used by Leopold Sedar Senghor at the First International Conference of Black Writers and Artists at the Sorbonne in 1956 was considered to be "the ensemble of cultural values of the black world as expressed in the life, the institutions and works of black men"² (in Osofisan [trans.] 1983: 13). The idealisation of African culture in, for example, Okot P'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, Camara Laye's *The African Child*, Kobina Seyki's *The Blinkards*, not excluding the poetry of Aime Cesaire and other French West African writers, is akin to the 19th century British traditional conservatism, especially in shielding the ugly underside of society, gender inequality and oppression. Both the "*Négritude* spirit" of the early African writers and the 19th century British traditional conservatism shielded the eyes of creative artists from the evils of their time while they glorified the richness of their cultures. It took Wole Soyinka's comment at the Scandinavian African Writer's Conference in Stockholm in 1967³ to redirect African creative writings to social criticism.

As succinctly summarized by Eustace Palmer in *The Growth of the African Novel*, Soyinka's argument is that "The African writer in contemporary times must be socially committed and involved, and he must be prepared to expose his society's shortcomings and suggest alternative

scales of value" (1979: 241). The call to change the critical approach to African creative writing was felt more promptly in the novel and poetry, and when dramatists finally responded, issues of gender were not considered fitting subjects for the stage in its own right.

Historically, theatre is the least receptive of subjects about women among the arts. The Classical Theatre of Greece, for example, barred actresses from the stage. The unique personalities and identities of ancient Greek women were masked by men, that is, by the male actors who played them. It is not surprising therefore that when the first generation of African playwrights⁴ – Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola and J. P. Clark (Nigeria), Ngugi W' Thiongo, Micere Githae Mugo etc (Kenya), Athol Fugard, Maishe Maponya, Lewis Nkosi, Barney Simon (South Africa), Tewfik Al Hakim (Egypt), Kobina Seyki, Efua Sutherland and Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana) etc. – turn their search light to African society, they focused on what they considered as not just the worthiest cause but also the most exigent, and that is, the recreation of authentic African experience aimed at redeeming the battered image of the continent while shaping its future. Gender related issues and problems were considered either non-existent or unessential and at best unimportant. Plays like Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), and *A Dance of the Forests* (1960); Ngugi wa Thiong'o's and Micere Githae Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976), Athol Fugard's, John Kani and Winston Ntshona's *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (1973), Kobina Seyki's *The Blinkards* (1974) and others concerned themselves with African colonial experiences underpinned by African patriarchal cultures. Even gender related subjects are dramatized as statements on the primacy of African cultural tradition. In the plays of pioneer female playwrights like Zulu Sofola's *The Wedlock of the Gods* (1972); Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1970) and Efua Sutherland's *Edufa* (1967), the volatile issues of gender imbalances are raised and stated but submerged in the overwhelming cultural tone of the playwrights. They are not treated as issues in their own right but rationalized in favour of patriarchal cultural conventions. The female characters do not have an ideological space in which to unite and strategise, and their quests, rendered putative and unsustainable by patriarchy are crushed.

In Nigeria, the radicalism of the next generation of playwrights after Soyinka, Clark and others is geared towards employing the revolutionary potentials of theatre to address class related issues, not gender. Playwrights like Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Kole Omotoso, among others are committed to the labouring and oppressed masses. Their vision of oppression in modern society is Marxian. Despite the revolutionary potentials they accord to women, by creating female messianic characters in their plays, the yearnings of oppressed women, for example, as

widows, wives and girl-children have no place on stage. Unfortunately, Osofisan and other playwrights fail to acknowledge the low status of women as a form of gender imbalance, oppression and inhumanity. Osofisan's play, *Altine's Wrath* (1986), ripples with the oppression of a wife, Altine, by a vicious capitalist of a husband, Lawal Jatau. Despite the soul-cracking gender issues raised in the play, the playwright drowns them all in the Marxist aesthetics that lump her together with other suffering labourers, thereby giving her the identity of a mass. The question that this researcher asks elsewhere and which is also the inspiration for this paper continues to baffle the mind:

Why Nigerian theatre is not favourably disposed to Feminist aesthetics.[sic] The degradation of African culture rouses the genius of playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Nwazuluoha Sofola and others who sacrifice everything and everybody to prove its dignity to the world through the stage. The groaning of the masses under the oppression of capitalism awakens the anger of Femi Osofisan and others who in turn breakdown all cultural boundaries that oppress and subjugate the masses, and re-evaluate myths and legends in order to liberate them. Why then has the women's call for freedom not awakened such creative impulse, especially among our male playwrights? (Ezenwanebe 2005: 73).

It is questions such as the above that necessitated the present paper, which interrogates the responses of new Nigerian playwrights after the revolutionary theatre of Osofisan and others, to women's oppression in gender relation.

Ayakoroma's *Dance on his Grave* and Salami's *Sweet Revenge*: An Overview

In his Foreword to Mabel Evwierhoma's *Female Empowerment and Dramatic Creativity in Nigeria* (2002), Mathew Umukoro claims that "[f]eminism does not reside in the gender of the author but in the content and context of the created piece, as well as in the overall artistic principles or creative philosophy" (2002: vi). While the researcher shares Umukoro's view that the meaning of an art work is partly determined by its context and content, this paper questions whether the gender of the playwright has any influence on the critical philosophy that gives the work meaning. The two plays being discussed are different in their approach to the female questions they address; they cover the dramaturgy common to the two waves of Nigerian theatre: the idiosyncratic, psychological and individualistic theatre of Wole Soyinka, and the Marxian, communal,

revolutionary theatre of Femi Osofisan, enabling the researcher to evaluate the female strategies of liberation from a broad perspective.

Irene Isoken Salami's *Sweet Revenge* (2004) captures the filial relationship of Sota and his wife, Aisosa. It represents the vicious imbalance in the relationship of husband and wife, where the husband, while occupying the public space, also exercises considerable power in the private space of the wife. It is a drama of social justice; of virtues rewarded and vices punished. In the play, Sota leaves his wife, Aisosa and four children in Benin and travels to England to complete his doctoral education only to return with another wife, Cheryl, and throw Aisosa and the children out of his house, despite her suffering and devotion to him in his absence. Sota becomes rich and famous and decides to enjoy his wealth with his American wife, Cheryl. He says to Aisosa: "I have had enough. You can keep the children; find them another father if you wish. Please stay out of my path" (2004: 27).

Unfortunately, his viciousness catches up with him and he loses everything – his wife Cheryl, his senatorial seat, his home, his job – he becomes destitute, while Aisosa becomes successful through hard work. With the help of a couple, Ede and Nosa, she gets a job, wins the senatorial seat, becomes a Senate President and crowns her success by winning numerous awards of excellence.

Barclays Ayakoroma's play, *Dance on his Grave* (2002), is also about crisis in a spousal relationship. While Salami uses the individualistic approach, Ayakoroma employs both communal and individualistic approaches to the problems of gender inequality. Like *Sweet Revenge*, the conflict in the play is a battle for gender space, a battle in which the women are bent on gaining a space while the men insist on pervading everywhere. The play captures the nature and effect of gender war between the men and women of Toru-Ama. The women of Toru-Ama demand from their men an effective representation and participation in the affairs of the land and to stop the proposed war with the neighbouring town, Angiama. The men see their demand as a threat to their manhood, a flexing of muscles by women and hence an abomination. King Olotu and his cabinet chiefs are not open to compromise; they rigidly maintain their ground on all the women's demands thereby creating stasis. The women use different communal tactics to press home their demands, but none works. Realizing the uncompromising stance of the men, Alaere, the women's leader and the wife of chief Olotu, brings the war nearer to her family by insinuating that Chief Olotu is not the father of their only daughter, Beke, since in his rigidity, he fails to allow her a say in the upbringing of their daughter. Chief Olotu fails to win the paternity battle as he commits suicide.

There are obvious gender imbalances that spark off the crisis in spousal relation in the two plays. This can be summarized in terms of the space each occupies and hence the degree of power or powerlessness each party exercises in the relationship. The men in both plays control both the public and private space, insisting on playing the rigid, domineering role of the traditional male in a modern society. The women of Toru-Ama have no say in the affairs of the land. The men take all the decisions, give all the orders and the women do all the listening and carry out all the orders. Gender is a social construct which defines what it means to be a man or a woman in patriarchal, male-oriented society; and in the Nigerian society represented in the two plays under study, power, be it social, physical, economic or political is the prerogative of men. The women thus map out strategies for emancipation within a socio-political landscape shaped by men and patriarchy.

Strategising for Gender Balance: The Case of the Female Characters in *Dance on his Grave* and *Sweet Revenge*

The Strategy of Choice

Every meaningful action starts with a choice. In Irene Salami's *Sweet Revenge*, the female protagonist, Aisosa, says that, "Our lives are a result of the choices we make in life" (83). Choice in this context implies resolving to act and effect change in the status of women or to maintain the *status quo*. The choice is born out of intense and often prolonged oppression of women and their realization of its debilitating effects on them. Feminists have emphasized the role of consciousness-raising and empowerment of women as viable means of equipping women with the power to choose to act. Aisosa is educationally empowered to triumph over her husband's viciousness through the choices she makes at every critical stage of her struggle. The women of Toru-Ama in *Dance on his Grave*, however, are not as educationally empowered as Aisosa and have to rely on the power of communal action and effective leadership. The two women leaders, Erebu and Alaere, move the women to action through consciousness-raising. At the first meeting of the women, Alaere explains their predicament and the consequent line of action in the following words:

Good women of Toru-Ama...You are all witnesses to what has been happening in this land. Women are relegated to the background in the affairs of the land....Should we not be consulted even in matters concerning our children and us? Are we only to raise children and prepare

meals for our husbands? Wash their cloths and not argue? (Ayakoroma 2002: 2--3)

The Women decide to adopt serious measures to force the men to grant their request of having a say in the affairs of the land. The men in both plays match the women's decision with unrepentant defiance and since both parties are poised for action, they each device further strategies.

The Strategy of Stubbornness

This involves the withdrawal of the different forms of services women render in the home. It includes kitchen cum bed strike. Neglecting the responsibilities of housekeeping and bed-mating are age long forms of protest through which women register their displeasure to their spouses. Whether collectively or individually deployed many women employ either or both to make their grievances known. The aim has always been to force the men to realize the fact that women are wronged and to persuade them to initiate a peace resolution.

Aisosa in *Sweet Revenge* embarks on a solo bed and sex strike to protest her husband's incessant contemptuous comments about her looks despite the fact that he neglects her whilst taking good care of his second wife. Unable to bear such vicious comments any longer, she leaves the bed for him. With great pain she bemoans her husband's mechanical act of love-making: "The sooner you learn that love-making is not jumping into bed with a woman at night, the better. My dear, it is a process and this process starts from the beginning of each new day. It is a holistic process. It involves your attitude, your mind, your mood, your physical being (27). She takes a firm decision and says to him: "You may have to look elsewhere tonight because I am not coming back to that bed" (23). Aisosa is bold and assertive because education gives her the power of utterance - she is an educated medical doctor and a consultant gynaecologist.

Unlike Aisosa who is educationally empowered, the women of Toru-Ama in *Dance on his Grave* gain their power and gender awareness by forming a common, united front. They are aware that their power is in-between their legs. At a meeting where they plan further action, the withdrawal of women services - sexual relations with men - is captioned "stubbornness". Alaere, the women leader and the wife of Olotu, king of Toru-Ama, explains the strategy of "stubbornness" in these words:

If they say come here... Uhm uhm! Go there... Uhm uhm! Pick up the child... Uhm uhm! Prepare food for me... Uhm uhm! If he touches the loose end of your wrapper... leave me alone! If he wants to force himself into you, you close your legs, *kpaam!* (11).

This strategy, Alaere further explains, means “no cooking for them, no washing of their clothes, or fetching them water to bathe, and no sleeping with them” (43).

There are different age-long forms of women’s collective protest in Africa, and they are widely recreated in modern African writing. The women’s “stubbornness” in *Dance on his Grave* is akin to the “Duty Strike” embarked upon by the women of Erhuwaren in Ola Rotimi’s *The Wives’ Revolt* (1991) in their quest for political relevance, and the effect of the strike is filth, hunger and incessant cries of children in the compounds. Ulli Beier documents the way Igbo women in Umuahia District register their protest. According to him,

If an Igbo woman is wronged by her husband, she will run out of the house, wailing and crying...This will provoke the entire women of the village to run together on the market place shouting excitedly and if the cause is important, the women from the neighbouring village will be sent for. They will seat solidly in the market place, a united front against the men, and they will expect to be fed until the quarrel is settled (in Enekwe 1987: 43–44).

There is also the collective “Nude March” commonly employed by women in South- West and South-East Nigeria and other African communities in which women, mostly aged, march along the road, baring their sensitive top or/and bottom, depending on the gravity of the situation, to protest against serious issues that portend serious disaster. A good post-independence modern example is the “Nude March” by Akure women in Yoruba society in South-West Nigeria who marched naked through the major streets of Akure on August 16, 1983 to protest the debilitating effects of a political tussle, the Ajasin-Omoboriowo Crisis (Fajimi, 2005). Such traditional actions often attract immediate response. The “Naked Dance” employed by the women of Illa in *The Reign of Wazobia* to resist the men’s plot to unseat Wazobia is similar to the Yoruba women’s “Nude March”, the Erhuwaren women’s “Duty Strike” in *The Wives Revolt* and the Toru-Ama women’s “Stubbornness” in *Dance on his Grave*.

The women’s strike fails to achieve its purpose in the two plays under study. The men, instead of opening up the space for dialogue,

maintain their rigid stand. In *Dance on his Grave*, the men embark on negligence and indifference: "let us ignore them. Are they not women? They will soon tire out". (37) In *Sweet Revenge*, Sota has no such patience. He drives Aisosa out of her matrimonial home since according to him; she is of no use as a wife if he can no longer sleep with her. The men's defiance escalates the war as the women re-strategise for a more effective political activism.

Female Bonding

This kind of activism is played out in women bonding or sisterhood. It is a form of female solidarity which I refer to as "women-helping-women-to-succeed" whether communally (women to women) or individualistic (woman to woman). The form of female bonding in *Dance on his Grave* and *Sweet Revenge* does not make the women separatists in the sense that they are not merely averse to relationship with the men but reject inequality and oppression. Female bonding may be realised at inter-personal or communal levels, in form of cooperation and friendship or direct political activism. Women meetings, gatherings, associations or formal organisation enable women to organise themselves and form a common front to champion their cause. They are rallying points for women related issues. In *Sweet Revenge*, Aisosa finds succour in the kind generosity of her friend, Ede and her family. Her move away from home is personal and was forced on her. However, she has to leave the oppressive, suffocating environment of her matrimonial home to Ede's house in Abuja, a new place where she is able to organize herself. In Ezenwanebe's *The Dawn of Full Moon* (2009), the helpless Daalu finds support from Obioma, the fiancée of her oppressor.

The coming together of the women of Toru-Ama in *Dance on his Grave* is a form of bonding for communal action. Many of their decisions are taken at their meetings in the market square and then implemented in their homes. In one of the meetings, they plan to embark on a political walk out on men, sometimes to another town. Alaere assures the women of Toru-Ama of this line of action if the strategy of "Stubbornness" fails: "If they beat us", she says, "We are going to leave the land for them. We shall found our own settlement; we'll see who gets tired first. If I know men very well, after one or two market weeks, we will see the result." (12) However, the excessively harsh response of their men gives them no room for migration in the play.

Spousal strategic separation, like bed and kitchen strike, is an age-long space created for dialogue and reconciliation of disputes in social and especially spousal relation. In most traditional societies, when social

relationships become very strained, the weaker who is often the female or child finds succour with the extended family relations. The temporary withdrawal allows tempers to cool and for peace to return. In such settings, in spousal relation, if the man beats the wife or sends her away in anger, the man must go with his kinsmen to his in-law's house to make peace and plead for the return of his wife. This is what the men of Erhu-waren do in J. P. Clark's *The Wives Revolt* (2003).

Another form of bonding exists in formalised structures like political parties and social organisations in modern society. In Salami's *Sweet Revenge*, Madam Power Power, Madam Show Dem, Madam Speaker and Madam Executive are not only politicians but also "king makers". They are members of political parties and powerfully represent women's role in national polity. For example, they mobilize women to vote against Sota in sympathy support for Aisosa. When Sota disgraces them and fails to represent their interest, they engineer his removal and later enthrone Aisosa in his place. Here women use direct political activism to liberate themselves.

Migration works out fine for Aisosa but not so for the women of Toru-Ama. King Olotu, "the Akpobirisi of Toru-Ama", the symbol of cultural tradition, vows to defend the tradition for which he is crowned king. He says "We would not like our ancestors to cry in their graves by allowing those hens to do things their own way" (52). Instead of initiating dialogue for a peaceful resolution, he decides that the women's unity and confrontation in continuing the social strike should be crushed decisively with the might of physical abuse through caning. He explains the caning strategy to the men of Toru-Ama as follows:

I am giving one (cane) to each one of you. This night, we are all going to sleep with our wives by the first cockcrow. If they refuse us entry, the canes will do their work. If we break their will, their unity will be broken. Do not stop until they plead for mercy. For those with many wives, by the time you finish with one, the most stubborn one, the others will pledge their unreserved loyalty". (55)

The men's strategy works out fine. The women are forced to sleep with their husbands.

Psychological Strategy

Alaere, the king's wife and the leader of the women in *Dance on his Grave*, refuses to accept defeat. She embarks on an individual fight for her freedom. She develops another strategy specifically directed at her

husband, the symbol of women's subjugation. The battle-ground shifts from the village square to her home, the palace of Chief Olotu her husband. She puts forward to Chief Olotu another demand; that she be allowed to have a say in the upbringing of their daughter, Beke. In his usual uncompromising manner, king Olotu refuses by denying her a say in the upbringing of her daughter, insisting that it is his sole responsibility as the head of the family. He arrogates all rights to himself: "I know my rights", he says, "and I will have them! I have the final say as the head of this family! I'll have no one, woman or child, encroaching on my rights." (27) He refuses bluntly to listen. "You are not here to reason, woman!" he bellows, "I didn't pay all that bride price on your head for you to come here and reason for me! I do all the reasoning for you and every other person in this house! No more of that rubbish in my palace!" (25). Chief Olotu's rigidity only complicates the conflict as his wife, Alarere, embarks on yet another strategy, and albeit a fatal one.

Realising that she is not making progress or gaining ground with political and social weapons, Alaere resorts to the psychological warfare component of gender wars which August Strindberg exemplified in his play *The Father*. Using the power of insinuation Alaere succeeds in getting it into king Olotu's consciousness that he may not be the real father of Beke after all. As Olotu groans under the agony of the thought, Alaere adds another frightful suggestion of his insanity which she claims could give her the chance to dethrone him and enthrone her daughter, Beke. Maddened and confused, Olotu makes a last show of his physical might. He pounces on Alaere and tries to strangle her.

Unfortunately, his strength fails to crush Alaere's psychological strategy as Beke's words "I hate you..! You are not my father... if you can treat mother like this, then you are not my father" (62) seals his case and forces him into despair. King Olotu loses out in the psychological battle; he is crushed just as he crushes the women up-rising with caning. In desperation, he drinks poison and dies.

The war is disastrous and tragic in *Dance on his Grave*. It is fought on social, political and psychological levels with appropriate strategies. However, *Sweet Revenge* is less tragic in the sense that no one dies. But sadly though, the destruction of Sota's marriage and family is the prize paid for it as man and wife go their different ways.

Divorce as a Strategy for Women Freedom

African playwrights rarely dramatise the dissolution of the family because it is the nucleus, the centre of African communal life. For example, despite all the horrors Aisosa goes through in Sota's house she never

contemplates divorce as an option. It is his American trained husband, Sota, who threatens Aisosa with divorce. Also Sota's American wife, Cheryl, divorces him and marries another man. This is also the trend in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* where Liza, an American trained wife threatens her husband, Lejoka-Brown, with divorce. None of the oppressed African wives, Mama Rashida and Sikira, thought of divorce as an option. It is Liza, the American trained medical doctor who wastes no time in letting her African husband, Lejoka-Brown, know of her intention to start a court proceeding for divorce. In a similar vein, Tess Onwueme, Buchi Emecheta and others writing from outside Africa, are more disposed to using divorce as a weapon in women liberation from spousal and gender oppression. Onwueme's Wazobia, the female protagonist in *The Reign of Wazobia*, is neither a wife nor a mother in the play. Henrik Ibsen in *A Doll's House*, can afford to dramatise before the audience a woman who walks out on her husband, symbolised in the slamming of the door to indicate finality at the end of the play. But in Tracie Uto-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House* the note of finality is removed. Before Nneora walks out on her husband, she leaves the possibility of reconciliation in "the greatest miracles" in which the two have to be so changed that their life together could be a real miracle as an option that Ikenna is shown contemplating as lights fade. Divorce is a formal dissolution of marriage through court proceeding and it is not a common strategy for conflict resolution in African drama. Aisosa and Sota can reunite if only Sota could put his pride in check. King Olotu also decides to die rather than witness the breaking up of his family. Separation is often the African alternative to divorce in filial conflict resolution; and this trend is reflected in most modern African writing. The issues are left open-ended, implying the possibility of reconciliation.

Gender Balancing in the Plays

From the analysis of the plays under study, it can be argued that the gender of the playwright influences his/her ideological and artistic philosophy which in turn determines the message of the work as well as audience response. This is because the attitude of a writer to his or her subject is the window through which an audience understands the work. The attitude creates the tone of a play and contributes significantly to the atmosphere of its theatre, and both tone and mood have the power to make an art form generate meaning and steer an audience's emotive response to a particular view. How the audience perceives the character's quest for equity in *Sweet Revenge* and *Dance on his Grave* depends on how the playwrights present women's struggles and strategies.

Irene Salami employs different strategies to maintain equity and fairness in gender in *Sweet Revenge*. There is arguably no act of revenge in Salami's play because from the course of dramatic action, it is Sota's male ego that negates a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Salami sets out not only to condemn women oppression in gender relations but also to build the woman in a way that inspires hope in the audience. This is a very crucial message and she employs a simple matter-of-fact, realistic approach. The playwright is clearly on the side of women as the oppressed. Aisosa is bold, assertive, strong, resilient and courageous and is endowed with the potentials for economic self-reliance. She is therefore well equipped for the tough battle for gender space. Though once crushed and battered by the inhumanity and psychological brutality of her husband, she does not allow herself to be drowned, and happily enough, the issues are resolved in her favour at the end of the play.

Salami's characterization saves the play from being simply moralistic. The moral tone is put in check by the protagonist and by the effectiveness and the thoughtfulness in the choices Aisosa makes. Like many other womanists, Salami believes that virtue and hard work are surer, safer means of freeing oneself from the clutches of oppression, and these she imbues in Aisosa, endearing her to the readers, especially the African audience. Any audiences, men or women, can easily identify with her. In the same way, Aisosa's husband, Sota, is castigated not because he is a man but because of the choices he makes. For example, his rejection of the good advice of his male friend – Nosa – makes him obnoxious and deserving of the fate that befalls him in the end. There are other male characters in the play whose goodness and sensitivity to women's concerns are equally rewarded. However, in real life, good is not always rewarded nor are vices always punished. Salami sets an ideal for women in the play not to be discouraged in the battle for freedom. In this way, she builds a positive self-image for women and inspires them with hope. Salami is well disposed to the oppressed female characters and is strongly convinced of the rightness and logic of their cause. Her simple and direct style, as well as her matter-of-fact tone renders her message unambiguous and easily accessible. She sees theatre as a tool to improve the status of women and ensure peace and balance in gender relations.

Barclays Ayokoroma's play, *Dance on his Grave*, is best described as a *drame*. A *drame*, as explained by John Gassner (1986) in his book *Dramatic Soundings*, embodies in its content and form the confusions and chaos of modern life. The boundaries of art are broken and there is no demarcation between what is serious and what is comic or even farcical. Ayakoroma's comic and farcical approach to an issue that takes the life of a

king is very appropriate to the message of the play. The playwright is not convinced that the issue of gender imbalance and women oppression really deserves all the energy and strategies that are put into it. As a detached observer, he laughs at the antics of men and women as they struggle to gain more space and maintain balance in gender relation. Though Ayakoroma is not overtly on the side of men, his techniques of subtle disapproval seen in authorial comments, castigate women and their quest for freedom.

Ayakoroma presents gender imbalance as a war of the sexes, and "in a war", says Alaere, "everyone goes with one aim to win. It could be by fair or foul means." (60) In *Dance on his Grave* the men and women of Toru-Ama engage each other in a fierce and fatal battle for supremacy and position. According to king Olotu, it is a war in which "one is not sorry for killing the enemy. You kill or you are killed" (61). Man and wife become warring enemies and the family is the battle-field "where two people or groups meet not because they hate each other, but because they have strong differences that cannot be settled any other way" (25). The gender war in *Dance on his Grave* is both sexist and spousal, but it is also personal and public. The war is so serious that it takes the life of the king.

However, Ayakoroma's satirical and farcical tools deflate the seeming seriousness of the fighters in typical fashion of Rotimi and Aristophanes. In the first place, the subject of contention is not considered serious by the playwright. According to Alaere, there are three major issues: "The place of women in the affairs of the land; calling for truce with the people of Angiama; and finally the future of Beke [their daughter]" (25). These serious issues which form the basis of gender imbalance are from the playwright's point of view, mere differences which can be resolved with little or no fight.

Secondly, the action is dramatized with boisterous comedy and farce which trivialise the issues discussed. The meetings by both parties, men and women, are characterized by banter and fun. Alaere's injunctions that "no woman shall allow her husband to marry a second wife... the woman should be on top when the man is sleeping with her... Maybe if we sleep on top, we will gain our rightful position" (5-8) are pedestrian, silly and unrealistic, and are deliberately deployed by the playwright to tone down and trivialise the subject of the meeting. The women's reaction to Alaere's instruction testifies to the fact that the real message has been trivialised. According to 3rd Woman "... if you have a bulk of an elephant as a husband, the idea of sleeping on top appeals to you", unlike 2nd Woman who has "a broomstick for a husband [with] Big calabash"! (7).

The gathering of the men at the palace is equally comic and farcical. The decision to neglect the women and their kitchen-cum-bed strike does

not go down well with some men. "And tell me, how many of us can control the toggling of the muscles down there [in-between the legs]? The thing has no ears...."; "You can look for a rope to tie it", Osima advises him (37). Also the fighting that characterizes the gathering; the "shouting matches", the caning scene etc., are all elaborate farce. The comic and farcical approach of the playwright trivialises the subject and masks the message from the audience. Many African male playwrights are at ease with this comic approach to women issues. Apart from Osofisan who, as a Marxist, adopts a realistic tone in *Altine's Wrath*, giving it the seriousness it deserves, other playwrights like Ola Rotimi in *Our Husbands has Gone Mad Again*, Ahmed Yerima in *The Wives* and J. P. Clark in *The Wives' Revolt* hide their faces behind the comical mask. *Dance on his Grave* follows this mould, and although it is a good play and a good piece for the stage, the level of theatrics and intricate dramaturgy pose a danger to how the subject matter is decoded and received by the audience.

Though Ayakoroma does not approve of the men's uncompromising stance, he does not disapprove of the cause they fight for, that "Husbands [Must] be husbands, and wives must be wives" (52) and that "a man must be a man" (54). Ayakoroma has no such sympathy for the cause of women and his disapproval is seen in his subtle denunciation of the meeting and the characterization of the women leaders. Erebu is described as "a short, stern-looking woman" (1) while Alarere is "another short woman with an aggressive air" (3). The women's meeting is freely described as "The gathering of the hens" (15ff). Generally, the play is cautious and its main message is directed more to women as summarised in the words of 5th Woman: "The word is caution. The face does not quarrel with the nose, which gives it beauty". (9)

Conclusion

The playwrights show their displeasure with the level of acrimony that characterizes gender relation in modern Nigerian society. While Ayakoroma denounces the uncompromising stance of both men and women, Salami rejects viciousness masquerading as manhood. In *Dance on his Grave* the men's rejection of the women's request fuels the gender war and results in different types of strategies, some of which are very fatal. King Olotu, the king of Toru-Ama in *Dance on his Grave* insists that, "For a wife to have a say means there are two masters or captains in this house." (23) The women's request is seen as an abomination. "Do they want to husband us?" (36), asks Chief Apod, "This is unheard of. Women wanting to put on thinking cap!" he added. "It is utter rubbish! They think taking care of the affairs of this land is the same as haggling in the Zara-

ma market?" asked chief Osima. For Olotu, the symbol of male ego in the play, such thought is not realisable since as the saying goes "Two rams cannot drink from one pot at the same time! They will surely lock horns!" (25), and horns the parties eventually lock.

Sota in *Sweet Revenge* is as domineering and uncompromising as King Olotu and his chiefs. However, Sota is more vicious. He uses his wife as an object for his selfish comfort. For him, there are no channels for dialogue. He asks his wife Aisosa, a consultant gynaecologist, to stop working in order to take good care of the home, and she does so; he leaves her in Benin, goes to England and marries a white lady, Cheryl. Without Aisosa's knowledge Sota brings Cheryl back from England and throws Aisosa and her children out of his house without giving the action a second thought. Sota is a reckless opportunist who believes the whole world including women, is made for him to use at will.

That an educationally empowered woman like Aisosa of *Sweet Revenge* should resign from her work brings to the fore the challenges facing career and professional women in a patriarchal society such as is represented in the play. This representation is not peculiar to Irene Salami. In Tracie Utoh-Ezeagugh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House*, Nneora has to close down her shop for marriage to Ikenna. In both cases, the action boomerangs on the women. Modern African society, it would seem, offers two choices to career women who are wife and mother; either they find a way of meeting the demands of their career with those of their domestic responsibilities as wives and/or mothers successfully, and with little or no help from the man, or they relinquish their profession or career and go back to economic dependency. For a consultant gynaecologist like Aisosa to resign her job in an environment of social unrest, economic uncertainty and political unrest as represented in the world of the play is at best a naïve and uncritical decision. It echoes the obnoxious slogan "Women's education ends in the kitchen" which implies that domestic, not political relevance is the sole aim of educating women. This should be a source of concern to all advocates of women's causes who see education as a means of bringing women to the centre and not to making them mere champions of the periphery.

The trends explored in both plays obtain in real life. It is painful to see young women in school who see education merely as a means of marrying a rich, wealthy and influential or powerful husband. Salami and Uto Ezeajugh do in their plays *Sweet Revenge* and *Nneora: an African Doll's House*, respectively repudiate women's willing economic dependency by making the female protagonists suffer for their naivety as a deterrent to others. Aisosa in *Dance on his Grave* is made wiser by the pains she suffers.

Although the time for male playwrights in Africa to address the issue of women oppression and liberation with the seriousness it deserves is long overdue, what is now required is the kind of seriousness with which many of them handle the bastardization of African cultural traditions and class inequality and oppression. The struggle to dignify women in Africa should not be left to women alone. Male playwrights should give it the attention it deserves if it is to be accomplished.

Notes

1. Anderson, Perry, "Origins of the Present Crisis" *New Left Review*, No. 23, Jan – Feb. 1964 (26 – 53).
2. This definition is as published in *Libertie I: Negeritude et Humanisme*, Paris, 1966.
3. Wole Soyinka's Paper "The Writer in a Modern African State" is published in *The Writer in Modern Africa*, edited by P. Wastberg, (Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, 1968) (14 – 21).
4. Unlike Balogun A. O. in "Gender Crisis in Yoruba Thought; an Aftermath of Western Experience" and Chigbo Ekwealor in "Women and Democratic Leadership in Africa: An Appraisal" (*Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol 1 No 1 1999) who deny the presence of women oppression and marginalization before the colonial experience, gender scholars like Esiaba Irobi, in "Feminist Aesthetics in African Theatre of the Colonial Period" (*African Performance Review*, 1.2&3 2007), Mary Kolawole in "Self-Representation and the Dynamics of Culture and Power in African Women's Writing", (*Journal of Cultural Studies: Gender and the Politics Representation in Africa*, 1.1, 1999) etc. acknowledge the existence of oppressive gender imbalance and opine that colonialism only serves as the catalyst that escalates it into a crisis, problematic level. I am also of the view that gender crisis is the birth child of colonialism; an off shoot of western religion, philosophy and education that shape modern African society.
5. See Ayo Akinwale, "Zulu Sofola: Her Writings and their Under Meanings", in *Nigerian Female Writers: A Critical Perspective*. Henrietta Otokunefor and Obiageli Nwodo, Lagos: Malthouse Publishing Company, 1989.

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