

Nigerian Female Playwrights and the Evolution of a Literary Style: Gendered Discourse in the Plays of Onwueme, Salami-Agunloye and Utoh-Ezeajugh

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Introduction

Nigerian female playwrights have over the years evolved a literary style that is unique in its committed presentation and representation of the African woman. From protests against obnoxious cultural practices, exposition of oppressive machineries, to affirmation of ideals, the plays of Nigerian female playwrights read like signposts to political, social, economic and cultural emancipation. As early as Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, the shared experiences of the oppressive forces encountered by women in Nigeria had begun to shape the female playwright's thoughts and influence the central themes of her plays. It is not surprising that these experiences have gradually culminated in a radical edge to the plays of Nigerian female playwrights. The pervasive nature of the diverse forms of oppression have inspired a shared consciousness or reality among women which is grounded in their life experiences and informed by a worldview shaped by their particular social sphere.

From Tess Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*, through Irene Salami-Agunloye's *Sweet Revenge*, to Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: an African Doll's House*, there is a gradual shift from highlighting instances of gender discrimination to interrogating the dual role of women as both the oppressed and the agents/aids of oppression. In x-raying the obvious lack of unity and endemic internal wrangling which are major hindrances to collective activism, these playwrights encourage women to unite and pursue the common goal of women's emancipation from male domination and manipulation. In order to achieve set objectives, women are

encouraged to develop new and different strategies that would enhance their survival as a marginalized and maligned social group in the society.

Nigerian Female Playwrights and Gendered Engagements

Nigerian female playwrights emerged at the point in Nigeria's literary history when it had become imperative to examine Nigerian drama from a gendered perspective given the oppressive socio-cultural conditions under which women had to function. In this wise, Lucas notes:

That time has come for the dismantling of old concepts and values, old mentality and principles, and old repugnant practices and replace them with pragmatic ones based on fairness and justice. If it happens in the creative arts world, then it is just a matter of time before it occurs in the real world (2009: 131).

The journey that began with Zulu Sofola's exposition of women whose lives are inextricably intertwined with tradition and controlled by cultural dictates opened the space for other female playwrights to create iconic female characters who are determined to subvert culture and tradition in a bid to champion and promote the universal rights of women. Prominent among the playwrights are Tess Onwueme, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Stella Oyedepo and Julie Okoh. These playwrights have identified drama as an ally and instrument in the emancipation and development of African women. This can be achieved through the dismantling of oppressive cultural and patriarchal structures, acquisition of higher education, striving for freedom from social inequality and economic bondage, the creation of awareness and platform for self-actualization, and a collective framework for the survival of women through sisterhood. These goals, when achieved, would go a long way to justify the efforts by women to present women issues in ways more appropriate to their gender than male writers have done.

The issue of women empowerment has attracted the attention of playwrights from the inception of literary drama. Plays such as *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, *Antigone* by Sophocles, *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen; and on the African scene, *Our Husband has Gone Mad Again* by Ola Rotimi, *The Wives Revolt* by J.P. Clark – Bekederemo, *Dance on his Grave* by Barclays Ayakoroma, *The Sisters* by Ahmed Yerima and a host of others represent attempts by male playwrights to interrogate the aims and aspirations of women. Very importantly, the emergence of female playwrights on the Nigerian literary scene signalled a departure from prescriptive feminist presentations to descriptive feminist literature.

Although male playwrights have thematically explored the various facets of Nigeria's socio-political life with regards to gender interactions, many of these playwrights overlook or ignore some of the pertinent issues crucial to women empowerment. In his observation, Nwankwo notes that:

The coming of feminism no doubt encouraged the emergence of female writers in Africa, the likes of Zulu Sofola, Ama Ata Aidoo and a host of others, emerged in the dramatic writings to re-write the women back into positivity after the unwholesome portraiture they received at the hands of the early male writers (2008: 172).

The emergence of playwrights on the Nigerian dramatic scene signified the need to re-examine gender issues that had hitherto been taken for granted in the discussion of Nigerian drama. Tess Onwueme (who can be rightly adjudged the trail-blazer in modern gender presentations in Nigerian drama) and her group collectively and individually advocate for the abolition of patriarchal values that subjugate women. They insist on women confronting traditional barriers that hold them down and relegate them to second-class citizenship. As I have elsewhere submitted:

In a society where the question of gender equality, women emancipation and empowerment have been pitched against traditionally allotted roles for decades, it has become imperative to revisit these themes in dramatic works. (2002: 35)

The presentation of women in drama exposes the fact that despite their contributions to the socio-political development of African societies, women have continued to occupy a subordinate position. Thus, we see in Tess Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*, Julie Okoh's *In the Fullness of Time*, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, Irene Salami's *Emotan*, and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Out of the Mask*, an exposition of institutionalised domination executed through established social restrictions such as taboos, norms and customs. In the social structure of most African societies, men are groomed from birth to imbibe an attitude of supremacy over women who are then nurtured to feel and act inferior to men. In operating within the sphere of social conventions and cultural restrictions, the woman is regarded as being less intelligent, less creative, less productive and of less economic value and by implication of less social value than men. Chafetz, who has examined the subordinate position ascribed to women in the Western society in her study, *Masculine, Feminine or Human?*, notes that

The words used to describe the masculine role are quite positive: 'practical' 'logical' 'experienced' 'brave' 'trustworthy' ... the tone of the words used to describe femininity is considerably, different. Such terms as 'petty' 'fickle' ... 'frivolous' 'shallow' and 'vain' are very negatively charged in the society (1979: 41).

Nigerian female playwrights have tackled women emancipation, empowerment and equipment with a vigour born out of the desire for women to emerge from centuries of male domination and to occupy prominent places in the sphere of societal relations. In making the case for women empowerment, they have encountered obstacles that need to be surmounted, weeds that need to be removed and ranks that need to be closed if the ship must get to port. By manoeuvring through the tide of feminist discourse, these playwrights have wittingly or unwittingly provided a platform and evolved a literary style that adequately articulates the experiences, values, hopes and aspirations of African women within contemporary societal concerns.

Nigerian female playwrights employ their plays not as weapons to battle men, but as tools to examine society's repression, marginalisation and oppression of women. In plays such as Salami-Agunloye's *More than Dancing* and *Sweet Revenge*; Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* and *Tell it to Women*; and Utoh – Ezeajugh's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!* and *Nneora: an African Doll's House*, the playwrights decry patriarchal structures of male dominance whilst being more focused on battling those forces of oppression that hinder women's socio-political development.

Tess Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash* highlights the plight of women, especially unmarried girls in a traditional society that tramples on women's rights with obsolete customs. In the play, Courtuma, Ona's father, insists on upholding the custom that forbids an only child (Idegbe) from getting married because such a person is expected to stay in the family to bear children out of wedlock in order to perpetuate the family lineage. To register his disapproval, Courtuma breaks the pot of palm wine presented by Diaku's family in the early stages of a proposed traditional marriage. Courtuma's refusal is based on his conviction that custom must be upheld above the social well-being of the individual. Ona's relationship with Diaku is also regarded as a taboo because Diaku is an outcaste (osu). Their love for one another is therefore unacceptable. In frustration, Ona defies or rather mocks tradition by accusing her father falsely of responsibility for her pregnancy. The resulting confusion exposes several contradictions as tradition is brought to ridicule by the defiant forces of change. Ameh believes that 'the centrepiece of the message is the urgent

need for change in a traditional society that places high premium on tradition and customs as well as parental authority' (2008: 56).

Onwueme's message in *The Reign of Wazobia*, on the other hand, is delivered in radical feminist mode even without the play being too radical. In the play, Wazobia ascends the throne as the regent who by tradition is to abdicate the throne for a new king at the end of three seasons but refuses to do so to the outrage of men. The Chiefs and other prominent figures are unable to unseat her because of the opposition from other women. These women rally round Wazobia and assist her in resisting all efforts to unseat her. In the cause of the struggle, she receives the cooperation of the chief priest and his co-workers who surprisingly return a verdict of endorsement by the gods. The surprising radical message of the play that led to the political and socio-cultural empowerment of women, is the role played by traditional institutions in fostering change.

Onwueme's other plays such as *Tell it to Women, What Mama Said* and *Then She Said It* treat gender issue with a commitment and a zeal born out of years of being subjugated as members of the female fold. Her handling of her subject matter contradicts Yerima's assertion that:

When women playwrights take on the gender issues in their plays, trapped by realities of their own lives, they find it difficult to discuss or raise gender issues and proffer radical solutions to the situations presented in the plays. (2008: 71)

On the contrary, female playwrights are better able to present women-centred arguments because of their personal involvement. In relation to *Tell it to Women*, Ameh observes that under the umbrella of the feminist discourse, "Onwueme exposes the ills of the local and international politics of oil exploration in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The concern for women nevertheless is obvious in that they turn out to be the ultimate victims..." (2008: 63).

Salami's *The Queen Sisters* is a socio-political metaphor for women under the subjugation of patriarchal forces which thrive on divide and rule by pitching women against women. In the play, Ubi, the king's second to the last wife, is pitched against the king's entire court, including his harem of ten wives. The story details the exploits of Ubi, the domineering, manipulative and radical daughter of Chief Ogieka. King Ewuare married Ubi to massage his male ego and calm his frayed nerves. Ubi fans the embers of domestic rivalry, strife, internal wrangling and struggle for the king's attention which had hitherto existed among the wives in subdued tones. At the same time, she extends her scope of influence to the affairs of the kingdom and undermines the authority of

the chiefs and even the Oba. With her strange ideas and revolutionary spirit, she becomes a distraction and an embarrassment to the throne. On the advice of Chief Osama, Oba Ewuare marries Ubi's younger sister, Ewere, but rather than douse out the fire, this stokes the embers of disunity and distrust and the tussle intensifies. The two sisters are pitched against each other leading to an assassination attempt, a frame – up for rape and finally, Ubi's banishment from the kingdom.

The play departs from the more common model of singling out men as the sole oppressors of women. Here we are exposed to familiar actions – women fighting women even when the battle and victory are for the benefit of men. The play exposes domestic and political desperations experienced by the Oba who can no longer exert any influence on Ubi. The Oba's 'face' as well as the 'face' of the entire men of Bini Kingdom has to be 'saved'. Force, intimidation and restrictions do not suffice as Ubi will not be intimidated by brute force, or pacified through persuasion, or hindered by the very shackles of cultural restrictions that she is on a crusade against. To buttress this point Ekwierhoma notes:

As a radical she (Ubi) existed before her time because most of the views and actions she is condemned for, are actually in vogue today. She may only be accused of not being messianic since her revolt is not for the women in the palace (2008: 44).

The lesson in this play can be derived at the level of female interaction. The playwright underscores the need to eschew pettiness, strife, greed, envy and all the factors that ignite misunderstanding among women. This is crucial to the attainment of the goals of women empowerment.

Utoh- Ezeajugh's *Nneora: an African Doll's House, Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again! Every Day is for the Thief, Out of the Mask and Olamma*, all tackle women emancipation from varied thematic standpoints. *Nneora*, according to Asigbo, "is presented as an ideal wife-submissive without being slavish, assertive without being pugnacious" (2002: 269). The playwright presents us with an eponymous heroine who embodies the quintessential essence of womanhood and who reforms the lives of all the people around her through hard work and self-sacrifice. Her embodiment of feminine virtues is first encountered when she intervenes and rescues Ikenna from peonage and unemployment. She secures a job for him through her benefactor, Osita. Years into her marriage with Ikenna, she sells her shop and baits herself in her desperation to raise money for her husband's surgery abroad. In later years, we see *Nneora* battling to save her marriage both from the pressure of a desperate ex-lover who is

hanging unto an unfulfilled promise and from the absence of a male child that has given their marriage a bitter taste. At the height of the emotional trauma, Nneora realises her unequal position in the house. With this self-realisation she takes vital decisions that would uplift her from her disadvantaged position in a male-dominated domain. *Nneora: an African Doll's House* is Utoh Ezeajugh's contribution to critical women-centred discourse on drama. The play does not preach radicalism but in its womanist and humanist approach the playwright encourages a union based on equality and mutual respect for and from men and women.

Nigerian female playwrights have continued to address the marginalisation of women in myriad plays. As women, they are sensitive to the peculiar circumstances surrounding the existence and survival of the female gender. Their plays are directed against oppressive forces that marginalise women.

Feminism in Woman-Centred Drama

Feminist postulations hinging on varied ideological conceptions have been espoused by scholars concerned with the empowerment, self-actualisation and self-reclamation of the woman in a male dominated world. From feminism to femalism, to womanism, to motherism, to black feminism, to humanism, the subjugation of women has taken centre space in literary discourse on gender interactions.

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (1792) has been upheld as the originator of feminism based on postulations in her book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, however, arguments have been advanced to the effect that feminism has its roots in the medieval writings of a French woman, Christine De Pizan, who wrote on the rights and duties of women at that period, especially in her most famous work, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (first published in 1405). Scholars such as Lucas go even further back to the biblical age and locate the first stirrings for women's freedom in the biblical account of Queen Vashti's (Esther 1:10) rejection of "the lowering of the dignity of womanhood by refusing to accept being made an object of display and ogling" (2009: 117). Feminism has advanced since then to a movement for dismantling entrenched patriarchal structures that have deprived women of equal rights and opportunities as men. Feminism is a literary as well as a cultural reaction to the excesses of male stereotype. Scholars have made the distinction between *radical feminism*, *accommodationist feminism*, *humanist feminism*, *womanist feminism* and *motherist feminism*. Many in Africa see feminism as too western and too radical hence the various theories that have emerged as derivatives from mainstream feminist concepts. It is obvious that social and cultural factors have

rendered western feminism inappropriate and ineffective in solving problems of gender discrimination in the African social sphere. Concepts which are more culture-specific and address women's concerns from a supposed African perspective are womanism, black feminism and motherism.

Womanism is credited to Alice Walker, an American novelist and poet who later emerged as a prominent voice in the black feminist movement. She introduced the word "womanist" into feminist discourse in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). Many black women before then had sought to expand the feminism of the Women's Liberation Movement beyond its concern for the problems of white middle-class women. Walker's use of the word "womanist" is inclusive of black and white concerns in feminism. Womanism is therefore a feminist term which reacts to the perceived non-inclusion or representation of black women's perspectives in feminist matters. It is a feminism that is close to "Black Feminism". A Womanist is a woman who loves women and appreciates women's culture and power as something that has universal significance. Womanist posturing addresses the woman question from the point of view of African social settings. It seeks to relive the everyday lives and situations of African women under the shackles of cultural inhibitions and social conventions. In assessing the feminist leanings of women writers, Ogunyemi posits that

Womanism is black-centred, it is accomodationist... it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children, and will see to it that men will change from their sexist stand. This ideological position explains why women writers do not end their plots with feminist victories (1988: 5).

Motherism, a brain-child of Catherine Acholonu, presents:

A multi-dimensional theory which involves the dynamics of ordering, re-ordering, creating structures, building and re-building in cooperation with Mother Nature at all levels of human endeavour. (1995: 110-111)

Motherism and womanism share similar values based on tolerance, mutual cooperation, love and service. Black feminism, though gaining root in the Western world, embodies the soul of the struggles of black women to gain freedom from oppressive social structures and institutionalised conventions. Black feminism conceptualises the struggle of a subjugated group within a minority group that is itself struggling to be heard. Black feminist thought emerged from the writings and discourse

of a burgeoning community of Black feminist intellectuals and academics throughout the last quarter of the 20th century. It represents more than a historical account or sociological description of black women's world-views and lived experiences. As a theoretical framework, Black feminist thought provides a black woman's analysis or discourse about black women's oppression in an unjust society. Furthermore, Black feminist thought allows for the development of alternative and distinct knowledge claims that emerge from and are grounded in a tradition of black women struggling against interlocking systems of oppression and their quest for self-determination and self-valuation. Though there seems to be a thin line between black feminism and womanism, Walker who began womanism would not want to be called a feminist but a womanist hence disassociating womansim from the radical edge of feminism.

In the dramatic medium, female playwrights have explored the ideological leanings of the varied strands of feminism in the crusade for women empowerment. In the radical feminist mould, Stella Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of the Bumpy Chested* stands out with its militarist ideological radicalism in gender negotiations. Other plays in the radical feminist category include Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash* and Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!*. Okolo observes that in *Our Wives...*

Utoh seems to be saying: for so long women have suffered ... slavery under the men... therefore, let the women rise and give the men a taste of their own bitter potion. This stance is responsible for much of the violence that is evident in the work. The speeches and actions are, more often than not, violent (2008: 174).

Radical feminist drama tends to use violent language springing from a radical ideology based on antagonising or getting back at men. Radical feminism aims at uprooting entrenched subjugating conditions by shocking both men and women into self-awareness. The socio-cultural realities of African societies have so entrenched male dominance that in the words of Ngozi Udengwu, "The superiority of male gender is taken for granted even by women. Women themselves have chosen the fringe position" (2009: 25). She buttresses this point with her analysis of the production of Salami-Agunloye's *The Sweet Revenge* at the UNIJOS Theatre on 1st June 2009:

What seemed to have been most objectionable to many was Sota's kneeling down before his wife. Even though Sota's action was simply a ploy to get back into Asisosa's life... the audience reaction showed that it remains unacceptable for a man to kneel down before a woman, no matter

the circumstance... On the other hand, the Nigerian audience finds it appropriate for a woman to kneel down and beg her husband for forgiveness even when she has not actually done him any wrong". (2009: 25)

It is instructive to note that no Nigerian female playwright is sticking to a particular conception of feminism. At the same time, they are not adhering strictly to particular conceptions for particular plays. Thus in a play such as *The Broken Calabash* or *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!*, radical feminism and womanism are explored while plays such as Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: an African Doll's House*, Salami-Agunloye's *The Queen Sisters*, Onwueme's *Wazobia* and Okoh's *Edewede*, lean towards womanism and motherism.

Despite the different ideological preferences, Nigerian female playwrights are unwavering in their undoubted commitment to the advancement of women's causes. They continue to mount combined and collective pressure on a male dominated society through their pens in order to, according to Nnolim, "change the future of women and create an atmosphere of self-definition for all women" (2009: 220).

Evolution of a Literary Style in the Plays of Onwueme, Salami-Agunloye and Utoh-Ezeajugh

Nigerian female playwrights have over the years evolved a literary style that is unique in its effective rendering of not just woman-centred concerns but harmonious gender co-existence and the smooth functioning of society and societal organs. In assessing the developmental stages of women's playwriting in Nigeria, three major standpoints and shifts in the predominant thematic preoccupations of women-centred drama can be identified. Although these playwrights have taken up multi-factional issues and given them exposition through the medium of drama, it is instructive to note that the bulk of their plays dwell on women-centred issues. Tess Onwueme, the foremost Nigerian female playwright, has written many plays which highlight the African woman's ordeal in the face of patriarchal domination while pointing the way forward to higher ideals.

Onwueme's plays include *A Hen Too Soon* (1983), *The Broken Calabash* (1984), *The Desert Encroaches* (1985), *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), *Ban Empty Barn and other Plays* (1986), *Legacies* (1989), *Tell It To Women: An Epic Drama* (1995), *Riot In Heaven: Drama for the Voices of Color* (1996: 2006), *The Missing Face* (1997; 2000), *Shakara: Dance-Hall Queen* (2000; 2006), *Then She Said It* (2003), *What Mama Said: An Epic Drama* (2004) and *No Vacancy*

(2005). About seven of these plays are gender-centred. Other women playwrights include Irene Salami-Agunloye, Julie Okoh, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Stella Oyedepo. Irene Salami's plays include *Emotan*, *Queen Sisters*, *More than Dancing*, *Sweet Revenge* and *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin*. All her plays are women-focused. Julie Okoh's plays include *Mask* (1988), *The Mannequins* (1996), *Edewede* (2000), *In the Fullness of Time* (2000), *Who Can Fight the Gods* (2002) and *Aisha* (2005). Most of her plays address women's emancipation from reactionary forces. The bulk of Stella Oyedepo's plays are centred on women emancipation with *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested* being in the radical feminist mould. Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's plays include *The Night of a Thousand Truths* (1998), *Who Owns this Coffin?* (1999), *Forest of Palm Trees* (1999), *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!* (2001), *Every Day is for the Thief...* (2001), *Cauldron of Death* (2001), *Nneora: an African Doll's House* (2005), *Out of the Mask* (2005) and *Olamma* (2010). About half of these plays are women-centred.

Idegú (2009: 157) highlights the gender significance of women-centred drama in Nigeria in the statement that "One of the most vibrant and potent ways of promoting the feminist aesthetics in all its varying forms is playwriting". The commitment of Nigerian women playwrights to women is in line with the views of Natalie who posits that:

Unless a particular writer commits his or her energies actively to exposing the sexist tragedy of women's history, protesting the on-going degradation of women, celebrating their physical and intellectual capacities, unfolding a revolutionary image of the woman. Such a writer cannot qualify as a feminist (1985: 112).

Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme are central to the first stage of development in the evolution of a literary style. Having come from a tradition where women are shackled by obnoxious cultural observances these playwrights having gained access to the power of the pen, utilised their new found weapon to highlight, expose and condemn cultural tools of subjugation. Many oppressive cultural practices are thus x-rayed in the early plays to come out of Nigerian women drama. From Tess Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash* and Julie Okoh's *Edewede* to Irene Salami's *Emotan*, and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Out of the Mask*; issues of cultural restrictions and observances ranging from forced marriages, ridiculous cultural impositions, female circumcision and the socio-cultural restriction of women and deliberate sustenance of oppressive social institutions are amply interrogated. This marks the first stage in the evolution of Nigerian women's playwriting. Accordingly, Eni observes that in Sofola's

Wedlock of the Gods for instance, Sofola exploits themes of marriage, custom and tradition ... Thus Ogwoma is unjustly treated by the male folk by being forced to marry a man she does not love. Sofola sees this as male Chauvinism... (2008: 155).

Although Sofola never took on the label 'feminist' and did in fact berate female elites for their seeming excesses in her plays *The Sweet Trap*, *The Wizard of Law* and *Song of a Maiden*, she definitely locates her female characters within tradition. There is also a major shift from her earlier ambivalent stance to women's emancipation in her later plays. In the later plays including *The Showers*, *Lost Dreams* and *The Ivory Tower*, there is a woman – sensitive approach to her exploration of gender relations. Thus as Emenyi (2008: 174) observes; "This enquiry allows Sofola to examine the wounds inflicted on women by negative aspects of tradition."

The early plays of Tess Onwueme, Julie Okoh and Irene Salami take on the issue of cultural subjugation with no holds barred. In attempting a feminist reading of Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*, Ameh submits that "*The Broken Calabash* is indubitably Tess Onwueme's arrival into the radical feminist fold. The play presents us with a clash of tradition and modernity". (2008: 56) Most plays to come out of the first stage of development as has been noted are thematically hinged on cultural concerns. In Julie Okoh's *In the Fullness of Time*, emancipated women try to enlighten other women still under the bondage of outmoded traditions and customs. The oppression of women is personified in Ofure whose desires and aspirations in marriage are thwarted by Audu's fixated notion of the subordinated place of women in the society. Here again, oppressive cultural practices are subjected to critical examination. Salami's *Emotan* treads the same path of questioning cultural restrictions and subsequent attempts by women to subvert the subjugating tendencies of such practices. *Emotan* exposes the subjugating and inhuman treatment of women (irrespective of social class) in Bini society and how women, through collective action, were able to question and alter entrenched observances and restrictions. Erwierhoma in her analysis of *Emotan* observes that:

Emotan depicts the stereotype women in Edo Society...acclaimed to be highly rich in culture and tradition. However, this culture in its richness hemlines women, limiting their autonomy through taboos and observances which many see as obsolete, behind the times and retrogressive. (2008: 42)

Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Out of the Mask*, set in contemporary Igbo society explores the intimidating nature of patriarchal society which hides

under the guise of tradition and taboos epitomised in the masquerade institution which men perceive as a tool of suppression, intimidation and molestation of the female folk. In this play, women break taboos and don masquerade attire as a counter-force to resist and thwart the plans of the male masquerades to molest young girls on the New Yam Festival day. This amounts to a radical engagement and dismantling of the mythological embodiments of the masquerade cult and its traditional oppressive structures.

This preoccupation with tradition and the quest by women playwrights to dismantle oppressive cultural structures marks their works out as mediums for re-examining the place of women in the cultural stratification of traditional society with the aim of encouraging the abolition of obnoxious cultural practices, restrictive traditions and inhuman observances. This may be analytically presented as the first stage in the evolution of female playwriting. The language of the plays of this early stage in line with their thematic preoccupations took on the nuances and flow of traditional oral narratives.

The second stage in the development of women's playwriting witnessed a shift from the condemnations of the old order to the exposition of oppressive machineries inherent in modern patriarchal society. In a society where both men and women have been exposed to western influences and education, economic empowerment and politics, the instruments of subjugation can no longer be traditional but have rather put on garbs of modern institutions. In effect, with many modern men seeing women, especially the educated ones, as threats to masculine assertion, women all over Africa operate under varied levels and grades of dehumanization in a bid to pacify or assuage male ego. Nigerian women playwrights found themselves faced with the task of saving women from the debilitating trauma of life in a society based on conventions designed to ensure that women are socially, politically, economically and culturally marginalized. The need to conscientise women, build up confidence in them, encourage them to assert themselves and aspire towards self-actualisation and higher socio-cultural ideals has become urgent and paramount. Many playwrights began to rise to the challenge. Ewwierhoma confirms this shift in Onwueme's drama when she asserts that "From a preoccupation with tradition, she has relocated her stance to politics and the place of individuals and groups especially those of African descent, in global affairs". (2002: 1)

This goes to buttress the point made by Tengya about Salami-Agunloye's drama in his "Readings in Irene Salami's Drama" where he reiterates:

It is clear that the playwright has her preoccupation on the issue of creating gender equality within the Nigerian society...the playwright subsumes the struggle for the emancipation of women with struggles of the silent majority who are daily suffering as a result of the laxity of the few within the African and Nigerian context. (362)

Thus the women in Salami's *More than Dancing* and *Sweet Revenge* are compelled to confront the painful reality of their institutionalised subordinate political and social positions. In *More than Dancing*, women are continuously relegated to the position of mere dancers at political rallies whose only significant political role is to vote the men into political positions during party elections. With this realisation comes awareness and the women shake off the shackles of political ineptitude and social marginalisation and mobilize themselves to sponsor a female presidential candidate, Professor Nona Odaro. More women are mobilised and the group set about dismantling patriarchal social structures using varied tactics to combat male domination. In her observation, Evwierhoma notes that:

The heroines of the play...are not to be held guilty of dancing, though we see them do a lot of that. The gains in Salami lumping them together to achieve the full conscientisation of Nona is worthwhile, as she is woken from the slumber of political ineptitude. (2008: 46-47)

With conscientisation comes awareness and with awareness, the quest for positive change and so, as Evwierhoma further observes:

From different social strata of the society, literate and illiterate, we see them take their future in their hands and not in their bellies hankering after political crumbs from the giant male-centred tables. The male conspiracy against the women does not work (2008: 47).

Many other plays by women playwrights seek to transform the status of women through conscientisation and empowerment. Women's drama of this evolutionary stage can be tagged the drama of social transformation, political awareness, cultural emancipation and economic empowerment. Women are encouraged in/through these plays to become independent, competent, hardworking, and focused. Thus, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's plays, *Nneora: An African Doll's House* and *Every Day is for the Thief*, explore self-discovery and empowerment. Nneora, the eponymous heroine, is shocked into self-realisation and determines to embark on

educational and economic empowerment. Her new state of awareness leads her to declare:

My freedom starts from this night. I will fly out like a bird... I will re-organize my life. I will re-open my shop. From the proceeds I will train my children.... Then of course, there is another task that I must accomplish...I must go back to school and struggle on, till I get a degree. (2005: 123-124)

The dominant ideological shift that characterises the plays at this stage of evolution is underpinned by the idea of 'emancipation through self-actualization'. Nigerian women playwrights are not just content with raising consciousness about the plight of women in hostile and unappreciative social conditions; they are determined to bring women out of a state of resignation to fate, to identify those potentials that would engender women empowerment. This ideology is unconsciously endorsed by Nnolim who, although taking pages to rail and rave against African feminist writers, concludes in the chapter "African Feminism: The Scandalous Path" in *Issues in African Literature*:

We all believe in all efforts of all women for collective self-definition and self actualization. We all encourage bridging the gender gap between men and women. We should all encourage all efforts of all women towards positive female-bonding and sisterhood practices as long as these lead to full liberation and emancipation from the unwholesome shackles of tradition, class, patriarchy, religion and custom. We encourage personal upliftment through education and economic independence for women... (2009: 226)

Nnolim here, by using the word 'we' has assigned to himself the role of being the spokesperson for men. That may also account for the brashness of his condemnations and prescriptions concerning feminist writings. Be that as it may, Nigerian women playwrights have been able to create female characters whose assertive personalities (especially from the point of self-discovery), radical postures and focused objectives, have provided the cathartic requisite for change. The language of the transformative plays, in line with the psychological disposition of the characters, reflects a new consciousness. The language is reactionary and denotative. Some of the plays are radical with very assertive dialogue. The efforts by the playwrights writing in the transformative phase of Nigerian women's drama have been acknowledged, even by hostile critics. According to Nnolim:

But all is not lost. The African woman, through the efforts of the female writers and critics is now much more aware of her identity and is determined not only to assert her separate personhood, but also to break away from the encircling shackles imposed by men and tradition.... (2009: 146)

The fruit of the efforts of women playwrights to empower their gender in Africa should be the total emancipation of women. The gains however are not accruing as they ought to and this has led these playwrights to seek out the cause. The discovery of deepening cracks in the walls of women alliances has exposed the need for a re-assessment of women's inter-personal interactions. Thus, the third and current stage of literary evolution in women's playwriting emerged with playwrights addressing female-bonding, sisterhood, mutual understanding devoid of envy and rivalry and cooperation because it has become obvious that these factors are fundamental to the emancipation of women. The realisation that all is not rosy at the women's front and that women may in fact, be the greatest enemy of women provided the impetus for a redirection. The most visible and most vocal woman playwright championing the cause of women through self-purgation and collective action is Utoh-Ezeajugh who unreservedly advocates for the unification of ideals and ideas, obliteration of cracks, intra-gender rivalries and internal wrangling which have continued to keep women disunited to the advantage of men. In a critical discourse on Utoh-Ezeajugh's play's Asigbo maintains:

The lesson to learn from our run-through of all these plays is that instead of fighting the men as pockets of resistance, Utoh counsels unity among the women folk first. A divided house, we all know, is doomed to fall; hence the call on women becomes clarion: Unite first and do away with internal wrangling. This new breed of feminism is what men should fear for it encourages women to unite in sisterly love before going for men's jugular (2002: 271).

The general consensus is that women can never unite to uphold a common cause. This perceived weak point in relations between women is usually exploited by men to keep women in perpetual disarray. Asigbo goes further to express his fears that "Once women clean up their act, the time has come to feel sorry for the male-dominated world, for women have the numerical strength to give men a run for their money" (271). In Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Who Owns This Coffin?*, the audience/reader is given an exposition on the "stiflers and job-seekers of the feminist cause" (Asigbo 268). The women only pay lip-service to feminist slogans and indulge in

all manner of anti-social activities and yet want to hide under the umbrella of women's agitation for freedom to achieve their selfish ambitions. Against this background of "reckless opportunism" by the "supposed feminists", Osofisan's introductory comments to the play declare that Utoh-Ezeajugh "surprisingly chooses to be different. Her attack is directed not against men, the usual targets, but, in fact against women who have set out to make a career out of their feminism" (2005: 1).

Utoh-Ezeajugh advocates the cleaning of the Augean stables and unification of women. This is aptly expressed in the words of Amaka in *Every Day is for the Thief* who admonishes the younger girl, Oby:

Amaka: Calm down sister. Don't start a fight until you identify your enemy. We shouldn't fight each other. We are the victims. He is the enemy. We were both used. We are both losers. Why should we then add insult to injury by tearing each other to pieces? (2005: 106)

In *Out of the Mask*, the significance of Utoh-Ezeajugh's crusade for women to unite against their common 'enemies', be they men or conservative cultural institutions, is highlighted by Mrs. Egwu thus:

Mrs Egwu: ...Now my fellow women, just tell me how we hope to succeed in this quest if we continue to allow periodic infighting, incessant quarrels, real or imagined conflicts and personal sentiments to take precedence over major issues? We just have to take a decision. Either to continue chasing shadows as we have done for years, or to close ranks and wrestle our freedom from the firm grips of men. (2005: 117)

In another play, *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!*, the women carefully build a network of unity that challenges and opposes the unequal treatment meted out to them by the men. Okolo, in her study on *Our Wives...*, observes:

Utoh's women all rally together to solve their problems...The support of the women for one another all through the elections is a remarkable display of sisterhood. Together, they bring down all oppositions and pave way for Irene to ascend the throne. On the home front too, there seems to be no room for the keeping of secrets amongst them. Problems are assumed to be common and therefore, everybody contributes to their solving (2008: 176).

The crusade for unity among women, irrespective of personal peculiarities, has been taken up by many female playwrights. The language of these plays have been stern, reactive and yet persuasive.

The support of women by women is highlighted and encouraged in Salami's *More Than Dancing*, a play that posits that male dominance in all spheres of life especially politics can only last as far as, and as long as women permit it. Women have the capacity to become architects of their own destinies and decide whether to be included or excluded in the scheme of things. The fact that Nona in *More than Dancing* later becomes President, is an affirmation of the potent power of collective activism. However, collective action will remain a dream without unification of purposes. Salami stresses that

Globally women have been known to use collective action to put pressure on the authorities in order to liberate themselves from one form of oppression or another. In Nigeria, examples of female collective actions against male intrusion into female spaces are known to have taken place (2005: 423).

In Salami's *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin* and *Sweet Revenge*, women work collectively for the emancipation of subjugated 'sisters' whose victory spells victory for all women. The market women in *Idia...* work doggedly to frustrate and dismantle the tradition of killing the Queen Mother once her son ascends the throne. And in *Sweet Revenge*, the women, including Isi, the house girl, Cheryl, Sota's British wife, Aisosa and Ede work collectively in sisterly bonding to put Sota's deceit behind and forge ahead. It is significant that when Cheryl realises that she had been deceived in her entire relationship with Sota, instead of reacting expectedly as stereotypical of women who would rather fight and blame fellow women, she chooses to apologise and forge a bond of sisterhood with her co-wife and bow out of the relationship that was built on deception.

Other playwrights have advocated for unity and collective action. Tess Onwueme is as assertive in advocating for unity among women as she has been in promoting the cause of women empowerment. Her *The Reign of Wazobia* concludes with the collective endorsement of Wazobia's kingship. All the women including earlier divergent voices pull forces together to tackle attempts by men to enforce female subjugation. Male protesters are ambushed and overpowered by women determined to act as agents of change.

It is obvious that Nigerian women playwrights have risen to the challenge of embarking on internal restructuring by exposing negative behaviours and encouraging cooperation among women.

Conclusion

Nigerian women playwrights have matured with age. Their efforts to extricate women from the clutches of obnoxious traditions have been complemented with moves to empower women through awareness and self-realisation. The journey that began with Zulu Sofola's efforts to expose obnoxious cultural practices against women has drawn many women playwrights who use the instrument of drama to work towards the emancipation and development of African women. They seek to achieve their objectives through the dismantling of oppressive cultural and patriarchal structures; acquisition of higher education; striving for freedom from social inequality and economic bondage and creation of awareness and quest for fulfilment and self actualisation. Finally, the discovery of deepening cracks in the walls of women's alliances has exposed the need for a re-assessment of women's inter-personal interactions. In response, the playwrights have embarked on a mission to encourage women to eschew rivalry and unite for common objectives. Nigerian women playwrights have no doubt arrived at that point where self-examination has become imperative. This augurs well for the development of a woman-centred drama.

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