

A Historical Survey of Playwriting by Women in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of playwriting in Nigeria since its inception in the 1950s. The study is basically a survey of the works of some Nigerian female playwrights such as Zulu Solofa, Tess Onwueme, Irene Isoken Agunloye, Julie Okoh, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Stella Oyedepo. Content analysis of their works, particularly those of the new generation playwrights were made. The findings reveal that Nigerian female playwrights are seriously committed to using their plays as a means of addressing some of the issues affecting women in Nigeria. The paper concludes that drama has remained an effective tool for sensitizing the society on various social issues, and Nigerian female dramatists are wielding this powerful tool for women empowerment and the development of the Nigerian society.

Keywords: Literary Drama, Female Playwrights, Women, Gender Issues, Playwriting, Liberation.

Introduction

Playwriting in Nigeria began in the early 1950s with the publication of *This is Our Chance* (1956) by Ene Henshaw, the first notable playwright in Nigeria to write in English. The play *This is our Chance*, dwells on the issues of love, war and village hostility. Princess Kudaro of Koloro (Bambulu's student), and Prince Ndamu of the neighboring village of Udura, who should be inveterate enemies, have decided to elope to get married, an outcome of Bambulu's new ideas. This incident provokes a violent reaction in each village. Ajugo, the Chief Prime Minister stands for tradition and insists that Prince Ndamu (their captive) should be killed. Enusi, the junior Minister, an advocate of change opposes Ajugo. The contest takes the form of blind argument. The plot is however, given a complex touch, with the incident at Udura. The young son of Chief Mboli has been bitten by a snake and he lies in agony of death. Princess Kudaro who was also captured waiting to be killed in Udura has brought out Bambulu's snake antidote, which gives immediate relief. The villages discover the need to live in harmony with one another. Generally speaking, notable contemporary Nigerian playwrights include J.P Clark, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Wale Ogunyemi, Zulu Sofola Bode Sowande, Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi among others.

However, Soyinka, Clark, Rotimi and, to some extent, Wale Ogunyemi constitute the first generation of Nigerian playwrights (Gbilekaa 1997:25). These playwrights present plays in which fate and supernatural forces play important roles in the affairs of men. In the words of Gbilekaa (1997:2), the plays of these masters, “give us a static view of society, a

recurrent cycle of anguish, desolation and disillusionment which keeps returning no hope of change.” In addition, these dramatists celebrate the prowess, masculinity and glory of men. Zulu Sofola, the first Nigerian female dramatist emerged on this male-dominated literary arena a little later, and has made great impact on the domain of Nigerian literary drama. Her works such as *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972), *King Emene* (1974), *The Sweet Trap* (1977), project issues affecting women and how such issues dominate the societies reflected in the plays. Her presiding ideology in the words of Nwanya and Ojemudia (2014:53) “is based on the premise that African women should study the traditional system and place of women as defined by it”. It is for this reason that Sofola has been criticized as a conformist playwright, who rather reaffirmed the supremacy of men over women in her works. However, as much as her plays appear to be in conformity with the patriarchal ideology, they remarkably reveal her attempt at tackling cultural practices that are inimical to the growth and development of women. Indeed, Sofola's plays explore the position of women in relation to the traditional society.

The next generation of writers usually referred to as second generation playwrights is represented by radical dramatists such as Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Olu Obafemi and others. These playwrights often express their dismay about the literary preoccupation of the first generation by proffering in their works a new vision of the society. The female playwright that dominated this period is Tess Onwueme. Onwueme's literary expedition began in the early 1980s when there were few female writers in Nigeria. Just like Sofola, Onwueme's earlier plays are concerned with the exposition of obnoxious cultural practices and patriarchal structures that are inimical to the well being of women. *The Broken Calabash* (1984), for instance, treats the issues of women oppression from a radical ideological stance. In the play, we find women fighting to break free from obnoxious cultural practices holding them down. For instance, Ona resists the tradition of her people which compels her to bear children into her immediate family to propagate their lineage. She declares unequivocally:

Let the wind blow
Let shaky homestead be blown.
Anything which cannot stand the force of change must
Be uprooted or be blown into oblivion by the
Storm heralding the new season (TBC 43)

Thus, she accuses her father of being responsible for her pregnancy. This turn of event forces her father to commit suicide, finally bringing about the defeat of tradition in the face of an inevitable socio-cultural change. According to Ojukwu and Utoh-Ezeajugh (2021: 124), Onwueme's later works “tilted to where female characters are revolting fiercely to the unjust restrictions placed on them by patriarchy”.

In *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), Onwueme “foregrounds women's political participation as against men's domination and monopoly of power; she focuses on the social repression of women; she advocates for women's participation in governance” (Agunloye, 2011: 31). To achieve this, she creates a strong and assertive female character, who is bold and strong enough to mobilize women against the repressive forces in the society, thus dismantling the myth and beliefs in African societies that public affairs are reserved for men alone.

The New or Third Generation Female Playwrights

The period spanning between the early eighties and the present day witnessed a great harvest of new generation female playwrights in Nigeria. This period is again characterized by a very high wave of corruption, political instability and economic holocaust. During this period, Nigerian female playwrights attempted to address a myriad of issues including feminist issues. Some of these playwrights also highlighted traditional practices that are inimical to women. These female playwrights built on the solid foundation previously laid by Onwueme. Playwrights in this category include Stella Oyedepo, Julie Okoh, Irene Isoken Agunloye and Tracie Chima Utoh Ezeajugh. Like Onwueme, most of their works project women agenda. In the words of Methuselah (2010:157), “The theme of infidelity, betrayal and cultural suppression of women permeates their plays with women suffering the brunt of male oppression and suppression”.

Stella Oyedepo made her entrance into the dramatic writing domain in the early eighties though her craft only began to blossom in the middle of the eighties. In her play, *The Rebellion of the Bumpy Chested* (2002), we are presented with a highly aggressive picture of women led by an overbearing and frustrated male-hater, Captain Sharp. The women are prepared to use radical means to fight for their rights which have been denied them. However, in her other plays, there was a paradigm shift to a more amenable and accommodationist woman's approach. In *Alice, Oh! Alice* (2000), Oyedepo captures the ugly experience of child abuse and exploitation, which have become an enduring experience in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Alice is used as a house girl and a sex slave with Madam Rokeke, who collects the proceeds from customers that come to abuse the twelve year old girl sexually.

Julie Okoh in *Edewede* (2000), exposes the agonizing experience of women who undergo the cultural practice of female genital mutilation. Edewede, the heroine of the play is however empowered to spearhead the eradication of the ancient tradition of female circumcision which she identifies as a tool of male oppression. In Julie Okoh's *The Mannequins* (2006), *The Mask* (1988), and *In The Fullness of Time* (2000), the male characters are portrayed as brutes who deal terribly with their wives. These men neglect their homes emotionally, physically and economically. Their wives are left in a cold and frustrated condition. However, the women continue to remain unflinchingly faithful to these men.

However, just as Onwueme departed from the theme of the early generation writers, the thematic preoccupations of Irene Isoken Agunloye and Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh also experienced a paradigm shift. These two playwrights began to use their plays as a means of raising the consciousness of women towards the need to fight for their rights. The plays of Irene Isoken Agunloye for instance, reflect a drive towards a re-awakening of the consciousness of women in their struggle for women emancipation. Virtually all her plays have feminist undertones. In the preface to *Emotan* (2001), Agunloye declares that her motive of writing *Emotan* is to contribute to the effort to celebrate the achievements of women in history books,(iii). In other words, her motive of writing the play is simply to deconstruct patriarchal ideology and transform the negative stereotypical roles ascribed to women in texts scripted by men. *Emotan* is a woman created in a strong feminist spirit. Right

from the beginning of the play, Emotan is bold, strong, firm and resolute (Doki, 2006:80). She single-handedly fights for a change in leadership and wins the battle, bringing peace and justice to the Benin kingdom by restoring Okoro Ogun's (prince Ogun) lost throne back to him.

In *Idia, The Warrior Queen* (2008), we are presented with a historical story of Queen Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin Kingdom. She was married to the Oba of Benin whose son, Osawe later became the Oba Esigie of Benin in 1504AD. The story of Queen Idia is one that interrogates the social bearing of tradition in the face of changing times. According to Benin tradition, the Queen Mother dies along with her husband as custom demands. In other words, once the son of a Queen Mother ascends the royal throne, the Queen Mother is killed for the fear that Queen Mothers are known to be a threat to the throne and the kingdom in the past. But Queen Idia refused to die and insisted that she has the right to live. Her refusal to die results in a chain of conflicts in the play. In the words of Nwanya and Ojemudia (2014:55), "the sacrifice of the Queen Mother is seen as a sacrifice of atonement"(55). But the playwright insists that such tradition is archaic and out-dated. She therefore calls for its abolition.

Agunloye's *More Than Dancing* (2003), is the playwright's attempt to rekindle the revolutionary consciousness of Nigerian women to rise up to the challenges of their time. This is an obvious shift in the playwright's creative adventure from historical documentations to radical political activism. The play opens with Madam Bisi, the women leader of the ruling United People's Liberation Party (UPLP), protesting against the marginalization of women. She warns women against the tradition of being merely dancers in political rallies and party functions while the men occupy every position of relevance in the party. She stops the dancing and drumming and reminds the women of their rights to learn to participate actively in politics alongside the men, instead of merely dancing in political scenes to entertain the men. She rebukes them thus:

Bisi : Stop the drumming! Stop dancing!! Stop immediately. Stop, I say !!! Enough of the dancing! Enough is enough!! ... Bisi: Is dancing all we can do?...(*points at the top row where the dignitaries are seated*) . Look at the high table. How many women do you see up there? The seats are filled with men . Where are the women? Where are the women, I ask? ... Look at us (*pointing at the dancers*) dancing and collecting two bags of rice, one bag of salt, one carton of magi cubes and two wrappers to be shared among thirty-five women!...Women these are distractions. (1)

The women leader disperses the dancers. She feels that the women have danced enough for their male folk during political rallies and party functions and she calls on women to go into mainstream politics in order to reclaim their humanity. This clarion call is quickly adhered to by the women who selected Professor Nona as their female presidential candidate and supported her massively during the election, resulting in Nona's overwhelming victory at the poll.

More Than Dancing (2003), is the playwright's attempt to make women confront the socio-political challenges facing them. Agunloye builds her ideological praxis on what she calls an attempt "to deconstruct patriarchal ideology; to transform the negative stereotypical

roles women are made to play in texts scripted by men" (Salami,ii). According to Awuawuer (2009:343), *More Than Dancing*, projects a new consciousness by women to challenge the male establishment after taking a critical assessment of their position in national politics. Thus, the women in the play resolve to put a stop to male political dominance prevalent in their society and redefine their own position. The playwright questions the low level of women's involvement and commitment in the politics of the nation; a situation that clearly reveals the absence of freedom, justice and true democracy in Nigeria. The playwright's position, as expressed in this play, is that there is a great need for the provision of an enabling environment for both men and women to exercise their political and economic rights without any form of discrimination.

Sweet Revenge (2004), Agunloye's fourth play, is a continuation of her advocacy for political space for Nigerian women. The play brings to the fore the ill treatment a woman suffers in the hands of her husband. The play explores the issues of subjugation in a society where women are considered unfit to hold decision-making positions. The play revolves around Sota and Aisosa who are both educated couples. Sota, Aisosa's husband leaves Nigeria for a four-year Ph.D programme in London, without making adequate arrangements for the upkeep of his wife and children. Thus, Aisosa is left with the responsibility of catering for the children. Worse still, Aisosa is persuaded by her husband to quit her job as a consultant gynaecologist in a hospital. Life becomes unbearable for Aisosa who finds it difficult to cope with the stipends Sota sends for the eight dreary years of his sojourn abroad. Sota finally arrives home to meet his wife, Aisosa, remarkably aged, ugly and flabby because of the stress she and her children have been subjected to as a result of Sota's marital irresponsibility. Meanwhile, despite Sota's incessant criticisms against Aisosa, she still mobilized women to vote for him when he contested election to represent his people in the Senate. However, after his success at the polls, Sota sends Aisosa packing from the house she built with the money she inherited from her parents and brings in Cheryl, his white wife. However, Aisosa did not resign to self pity. Her determination to succeed despite her poor condition occasioned by Sota's wicked disposition against her is finally rewarded by a reversal of fortune.

Tracie Utoh-Ezejugh is no doubt one of the Nigerian committed feminist playwrights who proffers solutions to gender imbalance. Her first play, *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again* (2001), which is the inversion of Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, raises moral questions on the issues of oppression. The play presents 'feminist activists', political agitators who hide under the banner of Women Liberation to fight against their male counterparts and even against themselves. They are described as 'charlatans, never-do-wells, social misfits, nincompoops, opportunists and morally debased women whose stock in trade is to lord it over their husbands in order to sustain their ego (Nwanya and Ojemudia, 2014:59). In *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, there is a total reversal of gender roles. Women are endowed with men's attributes and responsibilities and vice versa. According to Okolo (2008),

Utoh's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again`* is a conscious subversion of the patriarchal tendencies found in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* and their transference to

the women population (173).

The lesson drawn from the play in the words of Nwanya (2010:122) is that the oppression of man or woman cannot bring the desired peace and tranquility and no nation can achieve greatness amidst insurgency and insecurity.

Nneora: An African Doll's House (2005), which is an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*, represents a shift from Utoh-Ezeajugh's ideological stance in terms of her style, plot, diction and presentation of characters. While her previous works such as *Who Owns This Coffin* and *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again* present group of "women agitators" who are roped in "crude violence" against their male counterparts and even against themselves, *Nneora* presents responsible African women who remain focused in the face of many challenges. Nneora in Igbo means "mother of all" or "good mother" by implication. Nneora portrays an ideal African woman and mother par-excellence. She is a source of inspiration to the less privileged ones like Mama Uduak. In her immediate family, she is projected as a link between her frustrated husband Ikenna and her children when the latter denounces them. Infact, Nneora sacrifices everything for her husband, Ikenna only to be greatly disappointed, scorned and rejected by him at last.

Conclusion

From the foregoing overview of female playwriting enterprise in Nigeria, it has been established that Nigerian female playwrights use their plays to advance the course of women empowerment, and to sensitize the society on various social issues. They have written and published plays portraying issues that concern women thus unveiling their experiences as women. Tess Onwueme unveils the obnoxious cultural practices and patriarchal structures that are inimical to the well being of women. The third generation playwrights also referred to in this work as the new generation female playwrights include Stella Oyedepo, Julie Okoh, Irene-Isoken Agunloye, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh among others. Stella Oyedepo captures the ugly experience of child abuse and exploitation, which have become an enduring experience in Nigeria and other parts of the world in *Alice, Oh! Alice*. Julie Okoh in *Edewede*, exposes the agonizing experience of women who undergo the cultural practice of female genital mutilation. On the other hand, Irene Salami Agunloye's *More Than Dancing* and Tracie Utoh's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, showcase strong women characters who venture into the world of politics, an area that is known to be the exclusive preserve of men, and defeat their male rivals.

In *More Than dancing*, Nona Odaro displays the highest form of political astuteness and cunning that her male counterparts who underestimated her were left dazed after her unexpected victory. In *Sweet Revenge*, Salami revolutionizes Aisosa, her heroine, who deals with Sota the husband when he abandons her. The play advocates for the involvement of women in the mainstream of affairs, thereby moving them from the margin to the centre. Tracy in *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, also uses the most unconventional method to secure the presidential ticket. Given this extensive contribution of Nigerian female playwrights, the paper concludes that drama has remained an effective tool for sensitizing the society on various social issues, and Nigerian female dramatists are wielding this powerful tool in their struggle for women liberation as their contribution to women empowerment and

general development of the Nigerian society.

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