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**Democracy, Gender Issues and Women Empowerment in Nigeria:  
Reflections on Selected Nigerian Feminist Drama**



## **Democracy, Gender Issues and Women Empowerment in Nigeria: Reflections on Selected Nigerian Feminist Drama**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** Gender inequality has thrived in Nigeria for too long. Feminist scholars therefore feel that there is urgent need to change the status quo through feminist inputs and this led to the present persistent advocacy for women empowerment. Drama has been mostly deployed as a means of expressing this new trend of discourse. Thus, Nigerian writers, especially feminist dramatists, consciously reflect in their works the frightening realities of the prevailing socio-political and economic situations in the country, drawing the attention of the masses, especially the female gender to the inequality inherent in their exploitation, mobilizing the society to rise up against their oppressors. This paper therefore, is set to examine the issues of gender and women empowerment in Nigeria as reflected in selected Nigerian plays. The plays include Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*, J.P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* and Fred Agbeyegbe's *The King Must Dance Naked*.

**Methodology:** Textual analysis of the selected plays is carried out.

**Findings:** The analysis reveals that drama can be employed as a weapon to break the walls of cultural barriers that impede the struggle of women for social, political and economic empowerment.

**Unique Contribution to Theory Policy and Practice:** Thus, premised on the Womanist theory, this paper concludes that drama can be deployed as a means of promoting justice, gender equity and fair play in Nigeria's drive towards the possibilities of true democracy. This is the playwrights' contribution to the theory and practice of feminist drama in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** *Democracy, Gender, Women Empowerment, Drama, Human Rights, Creative Writers*

## **Introduction**

African literature is said to be politically committed. Indeed, “no serious and responsible artist can but be involved with the problematic human condition, the mood of the times, of the black man in Africa” (Kalu Uka, 1978: 19). Literary artists in Africa are committed to using their works as a means of unveiling the social, economic and political situations in their country. For instance, since the return of democratic rule in 1999, literary artists in Nigeria, in the words of Adegboyega (2020: 55), have been preoccupied with developmental issues in the country. Thus, the literary productions of the post-colonial African writers are predicated on the need to educate the masses of the African people, drawing their attention to the inequality inherent in their exploitation by the members of the political class. Literature therefore, has become “a tool to conscientize, mobilize and show the way forward to the masses of African people in their desire to liberate themselves from the stultifying grips of the political class.” (Agho, 1999: 73).

This embodying literary culture has found expression in female literary engagements as women issues have continued to engage the interest and attention of many scholars all over the world. Women issues have continued to engage the interest and attention of many scholars all over the world. In Nigeria, this new trend of discourse is receiving ever increasing patronage from feminist scholars and researchers who are interested in the full participation of all citizens in the social, economic and political development of their society. Indeed, the issue of women’s rights is a fundamental contest in any male dominated society. Despite the seemingly progressive actions by various governments in Nigeria to redress women’s conditions, old traditions and cultural beliefs have often given the place of eminence to men to the disadvantage of the women folk (Oyelade & Lateef, 2009: 224). Beginning from the family to the public sphere, women have suffered diverse forms of gender discrimination occasioned by deep-seated cultural beliefs, which place limitation on women’s role in society. Many people believe that women are weaker sex and their primary roles revolve around the family as wives and mothers, thus making them better suited for child bearing and home-making, rather than getting involved in public life. . This is why Nigerian women are perpetually left behind in the political leadership arena. The women are denied some of the rights and privileges accorded to men such as the rights to hold kingship and leadership positions, rights to own and inherit property and rights to participate in decision-making among others.

As a result of this persistent act of gender discrimination in Nigeria, feminist advocates and literary dramatists in Nigeria began to use their works as creative outlets to express their discontentment with the way women have been relegated and oppressed in the society. The writers advocate for gender equality and women empowerment. Their creative works, especially in the contemporary times, are geared towards unveiling the prevailing socio-political realities in Nigerian political system. In their quest for gender equity and emancipation, Nigerian feminist dramatists have taken up the challenge of consciously projecting the experiences of women in society, protesting against what they consider as gender oppression, marginalization and

subjugation in their works. They challenge the practice of excluding women from political participation and leadership positions, non-involvement of women in decision –making processes and many other undemocratic practices. The women insist that the same rights and privileges accorded to men be extended to them, contending that democracy has no gender boundaries in their social, economic and political status for men and women. Selected plays written by Tess Onwueme, J.P. Clark and Fred Agbeyegebe shall be deployed for this study. These three plays reveal how gender inequality and discrimination have thrived and helped to disempower women in Nigeria over the years. The womanist theory is adopted for this paper.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is premised on the Womanist theory. Womanism is a woman-centred theory meant to highlight peculiar gender issues in Africa and in the Diaspora. It ensures that gender issues are presented without jeopardizing the womanly value of the black community. Womanism advocates equality of all, irrespective of sex or gender in all things. Chikwenye Ogunyemi’s definition of womanism is adopted for this paper. According to her, womanism is black-centred, it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism, unlike radical feminism, wants meaningful union between black women and children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand (Ogunyemi, 1998: 65). Nigerian dramatists therefore, employ the Womanist theory to fight against the ills the people would want eradicated from the society. Some of these ills are reflected in the works of the three dramatists under review.

### **Gender Issues and Socio-political Development in Nigeria**

Gender issues have always remained a major challenge for women all over the world. In Nigeria, men are regarded as the superior breed while women are seen as weak, inferior and unimportant specie. Traditional African culture encourages patriarchy, which manifests in male dominance and female subjugation. This, in the words of Doofan and Alachi (2006: 192), “contradicts the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) Chapter 11(2a and 3a) which states that: Every citizen shall have equal rights, obligations and opportunities under the law...All citizen without discrimination on any ground shall have the opportunities to secure suitable employment.”

The roles of women in the overall development of any nation cannot be overemphasized. In Nigeria, women play significant roles as mothers, caretakers in family affairs, farmers, educators, entrepreneurs, teachers, etc. They ensure stability, progress and long-term development of the nation. However, Nigeria is said to be politically and economically dominated by men who dictate its political affairs and manipulate it to their advantage. Although the constitution of Nigeria guarantees equal rights for all citizens, regardless of sex, traditional practices of the people have tended to impede women’s participation in political development. Nigerian politics is predominantly the politics of men, who dominate the political arena. Men

formulate the rules of the political game and define the standard for evaluation. Women are perpetually left behind in the political arena, and only a negligibly insignificant number are allowed in to partake in the politics of the nation under the tutelage of men. Consequently, the major political scheme of the nation is manned predominantly by men; thus women's interests are not adequately represented in Nigerian politics.

### **Gender issues and Women Empowerment in the three Selected Plays**

Women empowerment refers to the emancipation of women from the shackles of male subjugation. It is the removal of structural constraints that curtail women's ability to control their lives and resources. Women empowerment means self-reliance for women in making independent decisions in all areas of the society. Women empowerment can also refer to promoting and propagating the rights of women towards self-actualization (Doofan and Alachi, 2006:192). The three plays selected for this study attempt to address these gender issues from a socio-political point of view. The plays focus basically on the social, economic and political rights of women and the factors that militate against their development. The plays therefore, can be seen as feminist plays. The playwrights highlight gender issues that infringe on the rights of women and militate against their full participation in politics and decision-making processes.

In *The Reign of Wazobia*, Tess Onwueme deals with the issues of non-participation of women in decision-making and specifically the exclusion of women from leadership positions. The play is an intriguingly subtle revolution that reveals Onwueme's feminist agenda. In the play, Ogiso, the male king of Anioma Kingdom is dead. Tradition demands that the community appoint a young female regent to keep the throne warm for a period of three seasons, after which a permanent male king from the royal family will be crowned. This tradition has remained sacred and inviolable over the years. Thus, the gods and oracle are consulted and Wazobia is chosen and installed as the regent of Anioma Kingdom. Wazobia assumes leadership, enjoys power and refuses to it at the end of her regency. This grieves the chiefs, elders and men who want her out of the throne. They ask her to resign, but she refuses. In a serious confrontation with her, the men offer her a steaming pot of herbs, which symbolize abdication, but she remains adamant. With the support she garnered from other women, she is able to suppress obstacles, intrigues sabotage, and consolidate her power and reign.

*The Reign of Wazobia*, espouses the idea of female governance. As Udentia(1993:128), puts it, "the play is hinged on the political consciousness of women as a veritable force of change, and their fullest exploitation of this previously latent potential to throw off the yoke of male chauvinism." In the play, we find that the women of the community have already mastered political intrigues, strategies, campaigns and propaganda. They have acquired revolutionary tendencies and have realized that they have a great role to play in bringing about political changes within the society. Wazobia exhorts the

Arise women. They say your feet are feeble. Show them those feet, which carry the burden of the womb. They say your hands are frail. Show them those hands have claws! Show them those hands are heavy! Arise women! Barricade the entrance to the city. I can hear trumpet sounds, voice of men spitting blood to drown us. With your claws hook them. But spill no blood, for these are sons of our womb(p.2). One of the lessons here is that women can fight for their rights without animosity and violence.

In this mock battle, the women overpower the men, and Wazobia realizing that power is not easy to leave refuses to relinquish it. She remind the women that leadership is not the sole preserve of men, and that the law recognizes female leadership, hence the law prescribes a female regent. Wazobia raises many political issues that are both revolutionary and inciting, while addressing the women at the palace square. She wonders why widows should be subjected to the torment of incessant funeral rites that men are free of. She demands explanation for the practice of making women to dance naked in public to appease the eyes of wrathful populace, and the reason why women should be beaten by men as if they are slaves (Nwanmuo,2001: 69).

Although Onwueme's presentation of the struggle for female emancipation in *The Reign of Wazobia*, is quite revolutionary, her brand of radicalism is not such that is completely against men or womanly values. Therefore, even though the women revolt against the men, Onwueme ensures that it is peaceful. Wazobia, the heroine cautions that the women should "spill no blood for they are the sons of our womb." (Asen, 2006: 186) . In other words, men are not regarded as their enemies. This is a womanist approach which emphasizes the need for cooperation between men and women.

J. P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* is an example of a play written by a male playwright that focuses on emancipation of the female gender. The play also treats the themes of non-participation of women in decision-making and denial of women's right to own and keep property. The play tells the story of how the women of Erhuwaren in the Niger Delta region walk out on their men and husbands to protest against the sharing formula used by men in sharing the compensation money given to the community by an oil company. The male folk who are in control of the communal government share the money into three parts: one for the elders of the town, one for the men in all age groups and the other for the women. The sharing formula is such that the men give themselves two parts while the women are given just one part. This decision sets the women against their husbands as they reject the sharing formula. The women condemned the sharing pattern which they feel is discriminatory, insisting that the money be shared in two equal halves between the men and the women. The men see this agitation as an abuse of customary laws and the women's place in the society, while the women view it as an attempt to relegate the womenfolk to the back seat(Otete-Akpofure,2011: 251). This culminates in crisis as the women

stage a walk out on the men as a way protesting against what they consider as an act of injustice meted out to them.

Clark in this play paints a clear picture of the image of the age long economic dislocation suffered by the Niger Delta region leading to the consistent clamour for self-determination and resource control. According to Benedict and Odi (2011: 80), the walking out of the women of Erhuwaren on their men “is likened to the failure of the South-South people’s agitation for a significant derivation formula at both the committee level and the floor of the general house.” The women in their protest made a case for gender equality and women empowerment. However, in the words of Benedict and Odi, good literature does not construct a single metaphor in a single work. They also maintain that, since the protesting women of Erhuwaren are the metaphorical people of the Niger Delta and Niger Delta is occupied and populated by both male and female gender, Clark may have thought of an epoch in the Niger Delta struggle in which women will be compelled to embark on social protest for the betterment of the society. (Benedict and Odi, 2011: 82).

The events of women’s social protest dramatized in *The Wives’ Revolt*, which was written and produced in 1985 received physical manifestation in the year 2002. This year marks the beginning of protest by oil bearing communities of Niger Delta region against oil producing companies and the Nigerian government who destroy the eco-system, marginalize these communities socio-economically for perpetual political dominance. It is the era in which the women of the Niger Delta, precisely the Ijaw and Itsekiri women laid siege on oil producing companies like Chevron Texaco. While the Itsekiri women of Ogborodo took over the Escravos oil tank farm, the Ijaw women of Gbaramatu and Egbema kingdoms under protest occupied four oil flow stations located at Abiteye, Maraba/OTUNANA, Dibi and Alero Creek belonging to Chevron for eleven days.

Clark exhibits a radical approach in presenting gender issues in *The Wives’ Revolt*. The women revolt against their husbands and walk out of their homes for some days. Incidentally, this play is written by a man who sincerely acknowledges men’s denial of women’s rights by drawing attention to the unjust development. Nevertheless, the women do not seek to cast the men out of their lives and live independently without them. Their resolve to stay away from their homes is only for a while. Their strategy is to make their husbands beg for their return. They are neither anti-marriage nor anti-motherhood. Their aim is to elicit men’s proper understanding of their plight and reasons for their protest. Their protest does in any way invalidate the African family communal bond. The interaction between Okolo and his wife Koko shows the existence of a bond between the two. Despite Koko’s disagreement with her husband concerning his attitude towards women, she is not averse to her responsibilities in the home. She returns with dishes of food in both hands, setting them down before her husband. Next she brings him water in a bowl to wash his hands before taking her seat (p.12}. The husband finds her cooking delicious and praises her: “a witch in the kitchen, that’s what you are”(p.14).

Clark's message to women in *The Wives' Revolt*, is that women should not fold their hands and accept the treatment meted to them by the society. They are to struggle for the realization of their rights, (Asen, 2006: 188) . In the play, the women succeed in eliciting a positive change of attitude from the men towards them. Thus, at the end of the play, Okoro the mouth piece of the community and a very strong defender of the patriarchy announces after resolving the conflict with the women that the women's demands have been met. He declares:

Erhuaren! Erhuaren! Listen carefully, all you! Open your ears wide so that you may hear well. The town has been brought together; all quarters, sections and shades of opinions, as from this moment, are reconciled and reunited with one voice... Right now let nobody pour petrol on a fire that is already dying down in all household... It is enough to say that husbands will continue to share with their wives whatever fortune come their way.

Clark highlights the importance of empowerment as basis for conflict resolution in the Niger Delta .The women have much right and claim as the men in the course of charting a glorious future for the Niger Delta region in particular and the nation in general,(Otete-Akpofure 2011: 253). Consequently, there is the need to involve both women and youth in this process of resolution, which is to be achieved, not through violence, but through negotiation, dialogue and peace processes as shown in the women's stand during their fight for justice.

*The King Must Dance Naked* by Fred Agbeyegbe is another instance where a male playwright genuinely fights for the emancipation of women. The thematic thrust of the play is about the exclusion of women from positions of authority. In the play we are introduced to a society (Itsekiri by all implication), where kingship is an exclusive preserve of the male gender. The prevailing belief in this society is that "no woman however beautiful , however resourceful is allowed to rule" ( p.3-4). Thus, when Queen Odosun gives birth to a set of twins (male and female), the oracle orders that the female baby ( Omajuwa) be killed so that she does not grow to ever aspire to become a king one day. Queen Odosun defies the order of the oracle and gives the male child out to be killed instead and grooms the female to become a very powerful king. She further orders the killing of prince Omagbemi so that he does not become a rival to Omajuwa . Omajuwa finally becomes king after great contention with the kingmakers. However, the gods strike and Odosun dies at her son's grave. Omajuwa's reign suffers pestilence and the oracle orders that the king must dance naked for peace to return to the land.

*The King Must Dance Naked* dwells largely on the issue of gender inequality. The play examines critically the issue of women's participation in leadership position. In a patriarchal society, kingship is synonymous with the male gender. Male hegemony is strongly embedded in the Nigerian culture and this is reflected in this play. This patriarchal belief of leadership as an exclusive preserve of men has been" entrenched in our traditional set up and the society is



socialized along this line so that deconstructing such tradition is nearly impossible “(Doofan and Alachi, 2006:205). It is against this background that Agbeyebe situates *The King Must Dance Naked*. His society is similar to any Nigerian society, which believes that : “No woman, however beautiful, however resourceful was allowed to rule”(3-4).

It is obvious from the above statement that the Nigerian society forbids a woman from holding top leadership positions no matter the status of the woman. Kingship position particularly is the exclusive preserve of men from a particular lineage. The picture painted in this play is a true reflection of the prevailing situation in Nigeria. For instance, since Nigeria gained her independence, there has never been a female president or Head of state like Margaret Thatcher of Britain, Benazhai Bhuto of Pakistan and Indira Gandhi of India. Similarly, we have never had a female Governor nor a female Emir, Oba or Obi in Nigeria. It is only recently that Senator Aishatu Dahiru ( Binani),is seeking to make history in Nigeria as the first elected female governor in the 2023 Adamawa state gubernatorial election held on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, 2023. Sadly enough , she is yet to be declared winner as there are issues surrounding her victory. There may be no laws preventing a woman from attaining higher leadership positions but there are structures put in place that militate against her effort to occupy such position of authority.

Agbeyebe empowers Odosun and Omajuwa with wisdom, power and confidence to break out of the chauvinistic claws of society. Odosun schemes her way from chambermaid to Queen mother. Having been elevated to such position of authority, she exercises power without fear. Thus, She defies the orders of the oracle by sacrificing her male child instead of the female as ordered by the gods. She equally ordered for the killing of Prince Omabgemi to pave way for Omajuwa to become king. Indeed, Odosun consciously set the stage for Omajuwa’s emergence as a king before she dies at her son’s grave. Having emerged as a king, she continues in Odosun’s footsteps, ‘’ empowered by the playwright to reign as a king even though she is a woman. Throughout Omajuwa’s reign, she is highly respected and regarded by all as king. However, Omajuwa’s kigdom finally suffers pestilence and she is ordered to dance naked for peace to return in the land. Her son, Mejebi appears and exposes her. She eventually dances naked.

Fred Ageyebge can be regarded as a feminist playwright who seeks to restore the dignity and respect of the African woman. He achieves this objective by vesting in women the desired power and authority required to take up their rightful positions in society. Such powers were hither-to, the exclusive preserve of men. But in this play, women are bestowed with power and ability to lead while their male counterparts are presented as weaklings. Agbeyebe therefore, can be seen as an advocate of women empowerment.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have attempted to evaluate the literary preoccupation of Nigerian feminist dramatists. The foregoing discussions have established the fact that feminist drama, especially in contemporary times is politically committed and is geared towards enhancing the socio-political

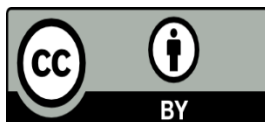
and economic development of Nigeria. But we do know that no single gender can make any enduring progress without the help of the other. The advocacy for women empowerment therefore, has become imperative. Through the works of feminist dramatists including male authors who are genuinely concerned about the need to support women's cause, the society is mobilized to fight against undemocratic practices in Nigeria.

Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* focuses on the rights of women and the factors that militate against their development. *Wazobia* challenges the practice of not allowing women to assume leadership positions. In *The Wives' Revolt*, J.P. Clark highlights the importance of empowerment as basis for conflict resolution in the Niger Delta. The play also sheds light on the participation of women in the Niger Delta struggle for social justice, while Agbeyegebe in *The King Must Dance Naked*, registers his protest against female subjugation. He empowers his female characters, making them stand tall above the male folk. These dramatists have stirred up emotions and initiated actions that are geared towards female emancipation and national development. This paper therefore recommends the promotion of justice, equity and fair play in Nigerian political practice. This will engender social, political and economic empowerment of women and ultimately enhance the socio-political and economic development of Nigeria.

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