

GENDER ISSUES IN NIGERIAN LITERARY DRAMA: AN EXAMINATION OF TESS ONWUEME'S RADICAL STANCE IN THREE OF HER FEMINIST PLAYS

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Abstract

Tess Onwueme is one of the leading Nigerian female dramatists today, who subscribes to the use of drama as an ideological tool for addressing gender issues and liberating the oppressed masses especially, the female gender. Onwueme's dramatic Oeuvre provides a thematic geography that lends itself to raising the consciousness of African women towards the need for revolutionary changes. This radical stance of the playwright is made manifest in a number of her plays. In such plays, she interrogates issues that border on governance, morality and justice. The protagonists of the plays are usually women who revolt against their misuse by an outdated and inhuman system. The study is basically a survey of three of Onwueme's plays which explore the thematic concern of this paper. The plays include: A Hen too Soon, The Broken Calabash and The Reign of Wazobia. Content analysis of these plays were made. The findings reveal that Tess Onwueme is indeed, a radical playwright who use her plays as a means of effecting radical changes towards sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Tess Onwueme, Literary Drama, Gender Issues, Radical Stance

Introduction

Gender issues dominate the works of most Nigerian female dramatists today. Tess Onwueme is one of the best known of these female dramatists whose plays highlight issues that impact on women. Her plays do not only reify women as buffeted by all manner of repressive traditions and taboos, but also interrogate issues that border on governance, morality and justice. Onwueme deliberately constructs the woman as an indispensable partner in the quest for solutions besetting the society. Her female characters therefore are empowered, focused, strong and assertive. Such characters as Glays in *A Hen Too Soon*, Ona in *The Broken Calabash*, Wazobia in *The Reign of Wazobia*, Rufina in *The Artist Homecoming* and The women of Idu in *Tell it to women*, all celebrate the multiplicities of human emotions, changes and triumphs with the women figure at the centre. These women refuse to be satisfied with their society-carved out role. They all fight their way through obstacles and proved their mettle.

Onwueme empowers the female characters in these plays to take a stand and fight back the forces of male oppression. This new feminist stance which propels women to rebel against whatever they consider as male oppression is referred to as radical ideology. Other female writers whose works also project radical ideology are stella Oyedpo, Julie Okoh, Irene Salami Agunloye, Chima Utoh, etc, (Emenike,2015:8).In Oyedepo's *The Rebellion of The Bumpy-Chested*, for instance, we are presented with a highly aggressive picture of women who are willing to use even gun to fight their rights because they have been denied of it. Also in Julie Okoh's *Edewede* and *In The Fullness of Time*, Okoh does not spare words in teaching and condemning what she considers as barbaric practice that has no place in the twenty first century. She uses the strong women characters to fight this archaic system. But this paper is mainly concerned with three selected works of TessyOnwueme namely, *A Hen Too Soon*, *The Broken Calabash* and *The Reign of Wazobia*.

Onwueme's protest stance against male chauvinism and all other forms of injustice is manifest in the above plays. The protagonists of the plays tend to be women who revolt against their misuse by an outdated and inhuman system. Indeed, Onwueme persistently offers drama as a catalyst for social change. Her plays are universal and they are for an international audience as they speak of the basic rights of nationality, age, sex or race.

A Hen too Soon

A Hen too Soon, Onwueme's first play published in 1983, is a protest against the practice of arranged marriages. In the play, Gladys, a High school student, is in a conflict with her parents over whom to marry. Although illiterate, Gladys' parents give her the benefit of enjoying some western education but plan to yoke her in marriage to Oboli, a very old man and the father of the affluent Amuzia. The major reason behind the marriage is Gladys' parents' desire to get rich quick. The marriage brings forth no child because Oboli is very old. However, Gladys' and Oboli's son, Amuzia, later indulge in an incestuous relationship which results in pregnancy. The act perpetrated by Gladys, a native of Anam village and Amuzia from Abor, desecrates both villages and rites of appeasement have to be carried out to placate the gods and cleanse the land. Nevertheless, Oboli dies and so does the child conceived by Gladys. But Amuzia and Gladys marry in the end. This play in the words of Ewrierhoma (2002), "affirms womanist ideas despite Gladys and Amuzia's act".

In this play, Tess Onwueme addresses the need for individual action to free oneself from the threat of annihilation. Gladys frees herself from Oboli, although at the expense of her reputation and communal peace in the land. Aspects of Anam and Abor tradition, which are constricting, are also highlighted. The bride price does not guarantee conjugal bliss, but Gladys is given away in forced marriage to the aged man who could afford to pay it. The above again depicts the ideas of liberty and confinement. Gladys in her natural home is a free individual, but in her marital home, she is not allowed freedom of movement as the wife to a Diokpa.

Onwueme's protest stance against forced marriage is evident in *A Hen Too Soon*. In this play, Onwueme uses Gladys, the heroine of the play, to challenge what she considers an oppressive and repressive culture of the Igbo-speaking people of Delta State. As the play opens, we are introduced to the obnoxious culture of arranged marriages as Gladys' parents resolve to force her into marriage with old Oboli whom she does not love. Gladys strongly registers her objection to the whole scheme. As an educated young girl, she has lofty dreams of liberating the women folk from the clutches of oppression. But she soon succumbs to patriarchal pressure as Okigwe, her father, prevails on her and forces her into early marriage.

Another issue which Onwueme addresses in *A Hen Too Soon* is the issue of motherhood. In the Nigerian traditional patriarchal society, child bearing is a woman's indebtedness to her husband's family. Therefore, a woman who is unable to bear a child for her husband is not only a failure to the family but a disgrace to the entire community. This is why Abor people expect Gladys to be a baby-making machine. Ogbe, for instance, would want her (Gladys) to produce boys alone, so the Oboli line would be further propagated (27) and she could rid herself of her indebtedness to the family. Feminist writers like Tracy Utoh, Irene Salami-Agunloye and Tess Onwueme are strongly against this attitude and they condemn it totally in their writings. They challenge the conventional male representation of women as mothers. The reason for childlessness is often attributed to the wife. Utoh Tracy subverts this in her play, *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, when Ene accuses her husband Iyang of infertility. Ubi, in *The Queen Sisters* by Irene Salami Agunloye uses infertility as a form of resistance to male domination, particularly in the traditional set up where she finds herself. She challenges the idealization of motherhood and the legitimacy of traditional

male hegemony. Gladys in Onwueme's *A Hen Too Soon* commits incest in a bid to become a mother since her husband is impotent and society compels her to have a child.

Right from the beginning of the play, we see Gladys as a female character that wants to challenge a repressive culture. However, rather than stand, face and fight its major structures and edifices, and not allow herself to be "stolen away at night" (Evwierhoma, 2002:190), Gladys becomes the victim, when and where she could have been the victor over the strangleholds of her culture that sought to annihilate her. In the circumstances emerging after the death of Oboli, tradition, in the opinion of Evwierhoma (2002), "seems to be the victor and not the incestuous pair". For this reason, Evwierhoma further argues that Gladys may not be seen as a powerful character, since she tries to escape from the situations that confront her. However, Evwierhoma notes that "if one considers the play, *A Hen Too Soon* to be a revelation of the travails and setbacks of women in a traditionally patriarchal society, Gladys may be seen as a powerful character". This is because Gladys' revolt is seen as a "violent" one against the obstacles, which her masculinist society constructs against her emancipation (Evwierhoma, 2002: 190).

In *A Hen Too Soon*, Anthonia is a school mistress. She is astonished that Gladys agreed to the marriage between her and Oboli. To her, Gladys' blind acceptance of an aged spouse is a grave mistake on her part. Anthonia sounds emancipated in her query of Gladys' action when she asks:... "when in the history of our society will women ever be given a proper, just, and rightful position in this our society?" (30).

The school teacher's encounter with Gladys makes the latter undergo self-interrogation and evaluate her position so as to seek a way out of her three-year confinement without a child in Oboli's home. To improve her situation, Anthonia advises her: "I would not advice you to resign yourself to fate. You must help yourself first and think about your future" (30). Thus, through Anthonia's advice, Gladys begins a search for redress. Evwierhoma (2002), sees Anthonia as "one female character whose force and power in the play may not be challenged". Although her role is not a major one, she has a major long-lasting impact on the heroine through her emancipated ideas.

In all, Onwueme has demonstrated her commitment for social change in Nigeria in *A Hen Too Soon*. Being aware of the oppression faced by numerous individuals and the need to liberate them, Onwueme embarks on a liberation struggle, which began with *A Hen Too Soon*. The playwright's commitment to her liberation mandate in the play, is so much that she becomes too concerned with the story at the expense of other elements that make up a play such as language, character and setting. However, her protest stance in the play is clear. The play is therefore a successful one. Nevertheless, J.O.J. Nwachukwu- Agbada (1992: 464), in his critique on *A Hen Too Soon*, states that "the play revealed two basic problems: the conception of artistic verisimilitude was poor, and the linguistic facets fell short of the level for which accomplished African dramas are now recognized". Another critic, Afam Ebeogu also finds weak points in the play's "hackneyed" theme and in the non sustenance of the feminist undertone. Never the less, the playwright's feminist manifesto is clearly demonstrated in this play.

The Broken Calabash

The Broken Calabash is yet another of Onwueme's plays which dramatizes family tensions underlining the subject of the clash or conflict between the values, institutions and practices of old Africa and those attendant on the growing westernization of the African. In the play, Ona, a university undergraduate, is an *Idogbe* or "male daughter" who services the gender role of male in the absence of a male child in her father's family line. By Ogwashi-Uku tradition, she is not

expected to be married out, but to bear children into her immediate family to propagate their lineage. However, she has a choice of marrying another female into the family to rescue herself, if she chooses to get married to a man.

Ona's concept of freedom of will and independence make these alternatives unsavoury and she rebels. She would rather like to marry Diaku, a man of her choice, according to the dictates of western romance. She thinks that by marrying Diaku, she will break away from the decadent tradition. To Ona, "anything that cannot stand the force of change must be uprooted or blown into oblivion by the storm heralding the new season" (63). But as an only child of her parents, she is an *Idegbe*, which implies that she must marry from her family and procreate within it in order to maintain the purity of her family blood. To compound her case, Diaku, her loved one, is an *Osu*—a member of a group of outcast. Her father, Courtuma Rapu insists that tradition be upheld, while Ona would prefer to have her way in line with the changing times. This conflict, notes Chidi Amuta (1989:54), first domestic and filial, graduates into metaphysical proportions as it comes to symbolize the conflict of will between two antithetical cultural values; the one receding and stubborn, and the other, equally strong and growing.

At first, there would appear to be an underlying conflict at the emotional level between Diaku and Courtuma for Ona's affection. But Courtuma's relationship with his daughter, as Amuta (1989:55) observes, "has something of an incestuous streak about it with him thinking of and talking to his daughter in terms overloaded with Freudian overtones":

Ona: papa, you must let me go. Otherwise, I cannot receive Holy Communion on Sunday.

Courtuma: ... Don't let it bother you. I brew the best palm-wine in Isah and we can buy biscuits too.... White man's communion? I have seen that cassock my dear child, and I can show that what that priest has in them I have too. If he, another man can forgive your sin and hold you captive with his biscuits and wine, what wonder would the power of juice from- from a loving father not do? (32-33)

Consequently, Courtuma's possessive attitude towards Ona derives from a combination of fidelity to tradition and certain subdued libidinal impulse. He invokes tradition to frustrate Diaku to marry Ugo, one of Ona's friends. The injured Ona wreaks vengeance on her possessive father by accusing him of the responsibility for her pregnancy. Caught in the pangs of shame and indignation, Courtuma commits suicide. This tragic ending, according to Amuta (1989: 55), "is celebrated in the play as a victory for modernity albeit a blood - stained victory" (55). This is a way of illustrating the truism that socio-cultural change is inevitably a contradictory process: "The Moon is full, The old season dies. A new crop is sown. What harvest do you foresee? Today is the climax of the festival ending the drudgery of the old season. The new yam will be eaten but it streaked with blood" (72). Contextually, Amuta notes that in *The Broken Calabash*, the death of Courtuma is symbolically interpreted to mean the death of tradition which he represents and the victory of modernity which Ona represents.

Among other thematic concerns, *The Broken Calabash* explores the woman question as regards the empowerment of women, the imposition of gender roles in a changing society, family values pivoted on the need for a male progeny and a conflict between Christian and traditional Igbo values. In resolving this conflict, tradition is given an upper hand, although its rigidity is subtly lamented and regarded as decadent. Furthermore, constricting fatherly love is given some focus,

while absence of freedom of choice by individuals is emphasized and the need for change stressed. In the introductory notes to the premiere of *The Broken Calabash*, Onwueme says the play:

... explores the theme of revolt of intellectual modernity against a decadent traditional value of the cast order, the individual conviction of the insurmountability of genuine love for another person in spite of traditional and unholy attitude of discrimination. (*The Broken Calabash*,11) .

At the level of artistry, Onwueme is first and foremost a symbolist dramatist. She exploits the immense power of symbolism, the ability to use the particular to mediate the general in order to elevate her drama above the merely bilateral and specific levels. In *The Broken Calabash*, Courtuma Rapu breaks the calabash of wine, which Diaku's family members had brought to seek Ona's hand in marriage. This is seen as a taboo because a calabash of wine brought by any suitor must not be broken in Isah land.

According to Amuta (1989: 56), this calabash is the play's crucial sign, as it reflects the seeking of Ona's hand in marriage by Diaku's people. In his words, "the breaking of the calabash reveals the female protagonist's shattered emotional aspiration and stability as well as the tradition which Courtuma strives so hard to defend" (56). Courtuma's action results in a cock-crow at noon –the cock is later discovered to be Courtuma's— another taboo which sets in motion a series of catastrophes for the Courtuma's family and the land of Isah.

To explain these actions, Courtuma confers with Ona, stressing the need for her to procreate in her natal family, which Ona regards as "sanctioned prostitution" (64) .This is akin to the type of situation which Ogwoma is faced with in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. Perhaps to pay Ona for her family's actions and also due to his impatience or the likelihood that he does not want to saddle himself with a tragic wife, or because of the fact that he, an *Osu*, cannot marry outside his caste, Diaku marries Ugo, Ona's best friend. This breaks Ona's heart just as the calabash was broken. To repay her father, Ona accuses him of making her pregnant, another taboo in the land of Isah. Courtuma becomes the scapegoat for cleansing the land during the Ine festival. According to Amuta, (1989: 55) it is "shame and indignation" which make Courtuma to take his life, another taboo in the land. He further asserts that as a tragic resolution of the major conflict in *The Broken Calabash*, Courtuma's suicide is a victory for modernity.

Thus, the events at the end of the play prove Onokwu, the goddess of the sea right. She had advised Oliaku against having a child but she turned a deaf ear to Onokwu's pleas. Perhaps it would have benefited Courtuma's family and the land of Isah if Oliaku had no child for Courtuma. This shows that change in whatever form it may take, occurs with some degree of repercussions. In *The Broken Calabash*, Ona and Ugo are treated as important characters. Ugo is Ona's best friend and both of them are seen in the opening of the play. She is also a University undergraduate but, unlike Ona, she is a "go-getter" and in the words of Ewrierhoma (2002: 184) a hedonist who seeks for enjoyment at most times". Ugo is a pragmatic girl who advises her friend Ona to show her father a fiancé to prove she has come of age. Ona takes her advice and introduces Diaku to her parents who reject the suitor's request because Ona is an *Idogbe*; a daughter who must remain within the household to propagate the line. Ugo, however, turns around to marry Diaku, showing that both herself and Diaku who have been rejected by Courtuma's family have found a place for each other. It is her treachery, which forces Ona to label her father with the sin of incest .Perhaps Ugo married Diaku in order to spite Ona and her family.

But one may also regard the action of Ugo as a revolt against the forces of tradition; a feat that Ona could not achieve. She marries Diaku, an Osu, rejected by Ona's parents. Although Ona is empowered by University education and an elevated consciousness, she bows to tradition in the end in three regards. Firstly, according to the dictates of the traditional caste system, she is not expected to marry Diaku, an *Osu*, and she does not in the final analysis. Secondly, she is pronounced an ill-fated child before birth and she fulfils the oracular verdict of complicating her parents' lives (29). Thirdly, she fights the *Idegbe* system and ends up as one herself having succumbed to the system at the end.

The three factors enumerated above prove that ancient traditions hold sway, over all the characters in *The Broken Calabash*. Ona is a tragic character, who suffers greater confinement at home than within the campus walls. Her father, Chief Rapu Courtuma, wants her indoors always fearing and attempting to prevent her amorous involvement with any man. Ironically, it is her father who has experienced the benefits of modernization who censures the likelihood of Ona getting westernized (32). Ona decides to punish her father for letting her fiancé, Diaku marry Ugo her best friend, by placing the responsibility for her pregnancy on him. This single act on her part brings catastrophe to Isah land. This turn of events causes Courtuma to commit suicide, finally bringing about the defeat of tradition in the face of an inevitable socio-cultural change.

In the two plays discussed so far, we have seen that the theme of the so much bandied tradition versus modernity is explored. In the two plays both Gladys and Ona fight strenuously against archaic patriarchal expectations, resulting to some of the unpleasanties and taboos committed. Although Gladys and Ona, the protagonists of these two plays have registered their protests against what they consider as obnoxious traditional practices, they succumbed at the end to the heavy weight of traditional pressures. Gladys bows to tradition and marries Oboli only to commit incest with Amuzia. Ona could not marry Diaku, her dream husband, because of the forces of tradition. No doubt, these two protagonists have put up a good fight but could not sustain it. What Onwueme seems to be saying here is that the fight against the forces of oppression should be done without compromise (Eziechine, 2013: 107)

It is important to note here however, that Onwueme's aesthetic prowess begins to manifest in her second play, *The Broken Calabash*. In this play, she exploits the immense power of symbolism. The central symbol in the play is the calabash of palm-wine brought by Diaku's parents to ask for Ona's hand in marriage, which Courtuma breaks in a fit of rage. In terms of dramatic method, Onwueme also displays a high degree of innovativeness and great technical variability in *The Broken Calabash*. The language of the play is simple and straight forward. This is not to say however, that there are no expressions with hidden meanings. The title of the play for instance, does not yield itself to easy interpretation. One may need to go beyond the surface level to grasp the full meaning of the title and the real implication of the action of breaking a calabash of palm wine presented by a suitor seeking the hand of a woman in marriage. Nevertheless, there are still some shortcomings in the play. There is a disturbing simplicity in Onwueme's grasp of the issues which constitute her themes. The sudden growth of Ona in the seventh movement of the play for instance, is also unrealistic.

The Reign of Wazobia

In *The Reign of Wazobia*, 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. From the

earliest times this tradition has remained inviolate and sacred. The gods and oracle are consulted and Wazobia is chosen and installed the regent of Anioma kingdom.

Wazobia assumes leadership, tastes power, likes it and refuses to relinquish it at the end of her regency. This unnerves the chiefs, elders and men who want her out. They ask her to resign, but she refuses. In a serious confrontation with her, the men offer her a steaming pot of herbs, symbolizing abdication but she is defiant. With the support and confidence of other women, she is able to suppress obstacles, intrigues and 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, the women of the community have already mastered political intrigue, 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 them thus:

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! Wake up women! Arise women! Barricade the entrance to the city. I can hear trumpet sounds, voice of men splitting blood to drown us. With your claws hook them. But spill no blood, for these are sons of our womb. (2)

In this mock-battle, the women overpower the men, and Wazobia realizing that power is not easy to leave refuses to relinquish it. She reminds the women that leadership is not the sole preserve of men alone, and that the law recognizes female leadership, hence the law prescribes a female regent.

While addressing the women at the palace-square, she raises many political issues that are as revolutionary as they are inciting. 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 or *fufu*.

Wazobia: Why, may I ask must widows be subjected to the torment of incessant funeral rites that men are free of, under similar situations, Omu?

Omu: It is our tradition that women who survive funeral rituals dance in the market place as final mark of their innocence regarding their husbands' death. A woman who dies mourning is unclean and must be left to rot in the evil forest.

Wazobia: I see, Omu. My women will not dance naked in public to appease the eyes of wrathful populace. This is no era for dancing to entertain lustful eyes (21).

Wazobia speaks with many tongues acquired from sojourning beyond the seas and proclaims women's liberation and emancipation. She claims that men have misruled women for centuries and declares that henceforth, women should have equal representation in rulership; they should have equal rights of inheritance in matters of land and property. She further declares that women should be seen as human beings with potentials waiting to be actualized for the benefit of the land rather than be seen as food attendants. She urges the women to go into the world and make a living for themselves, with or without men. This "to Chris Nwamuo, (2001:70) is obviously a

new voice, a modern voice, and the voice of change, the voice of support, and encouragement for women”.

The men resent this, organize themselves into opposition groups, hold series of meetings, conspire against her, but end up in sabotage against themselves. With overwhelming support from the women, Wazobia consolidates her reign and wields absolute political power.

Zulu Sofola's *King Emene* also treats this same issue of politics of change. The political issues in this play revolve around the tussle for power between Nneobi (the king's mother) and the queen, over who has more power in the palace. It is also evident in the conflict between Obiageli and Nneobi over whose son should rule as the rightful heir to the throne. The political dimension appears more prominent in the banishment of the Omu by the king.

Among the Igbo people of Delta State, the management of village and community affairs rests squarely on two local monarchs: the male *Obi* and the female *Omu*. Both are crowned and acknowledged heads who live in palaces and rule from thrones. The word *Omu* means mother. As a female counterpart to the *Obi*, the *Omu* has her own cabinet, the *ilogo*, made up of councillors. Mabel Tobrise (2001:265), maintains that “Wazobia's concept of progress, peace, communal welfare, and female empowerment enables patriarchal Ilaa to see women in contemporary light, as dynamic agents of change”.

Onwueme's plays focus on the rights of women and factors that militate against their development. In *The Reign of Wazobia*, the two themes of non-participation of women in decision making and specifically the exclusion of women from leadership positions are all discriminatory against women. Onwueme's radical approach in passing her message across is obvious in this play. In the play, Wazobia is a rebel who succeeds in her plan. She leads other women to confront the men and to show disregard for tradition, in order to bring about a change in the attitude of men towards them. Onwueme also uses strong characterization, sheer determination and the ruthlessness men usually exhibit to make her point.

This play can be likened to J.P Clark's *The Wives Revolt*. In *The Wives' Revolt*, J.P Clark exhibits a radical approach in challenging the practice of not allowing women to participate in decision-making and denial of women's right to own and keep property. In the play, the women kick against tradition, confront the men by stating their points forcefully and finally revolt by leaving their matrimonial homes, thereby turning their backs on their husbands and children, though temporarily.

The Reign of Wazobia is one of the few plays where women's resistance to cultural oppression is allowed to succeed on the stage. In many other plays, their struggle is crushed and their quest for freedom misrepresented as a violation of culture which is not allowed to see the light of the day. Gladys' attempt to marry Amuzia, her dream husband, in *A Hen Too Soon* is treated as a taboo; Ona's determination to free herself from the oppressive custom of “*Idigbo*” and the caste system” is subsumed under the strength of the African culture in *The Broken Calabash*. The voices of Ebiere in J.P Clark's *Song of a Goat* and Ogwoma's in Zulu Sofola's *The Wedlock of the Gods* respectively and several others are represented as voices of evil and cultural aberration and are crushed as a warning to others.

Onwueme sees any tradition that holds women down as oppressive and must be pulled down. Her female characters triumph over practices that reduce their personality to the state of being a property to be owned and handled as deemed fit by the owner. In the opinion of Nwamu, (2001),

The Reign of Wazobia portrays women as coming to the realization that they have a great role to play in bringing about political change within the society. They desire to get into political leadership so that they can demonstrate their capability in taking care of men, being vocal in community matters and participating in governance.

The Reign of Wazobia is a revolutionary play which reveals Onwueme's feminist agenda. In order to achieve her aim the playwright equips the women with revolutionary consciousness. She also appropriates the voice of divinity to sermonize on both equality and women's capacity for all round ascendancy.

Onwueme's dramaturgy is unique in her portrayal of Wazobia, her major female character. She presents her as a very strong and unyielding character, who champions the cause of the oppressed, and initiates revolutionary changes for the progress of the society. Wazobia uses persuasive language to convince the Ilaa women especially the *Omu*, of the need for change. She speaks authoritatively when she addresses the issue of wife-beating. Her manifesto is presented in a figurative language. The name "Wazobia", given to Onwueme's major female character is significant. Wa, Zo and Bia are wives of the late Obi, inherited by Wazobia as levirate wives. Their names signify "come", in the three of the main Nigerian languages -Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo respectively

One of the weaknesses of the play however, is that Wazobia as a character is idealized beyond some reasonable level. Onwueme makes her wield excessive power in the domestic sphere, where the man traditionally holds more authority. Besides, the practice of making Wazobia to inherit the late Obi's wives seems to have contradicted the womanist position against lesbianism. This is an ideological mix-up.

Conclusion

From the foregoing so far, one can conclude that Onwueme's plays highlight issues that impact on women. Her writings, like those of most other female writers, reify women as buffeted by all manner of repressive traditions, taboos and a myriad of other dos and don'ts. She projects issues of the female quest for space within the Nigerian socio-political milieu. Furthermore, her plays interrogate issues that border on governance, morality and justice. *A Hen Too Soon* and *The Broken Calabash* interrogate traditional practices as they affect the marital institution in Nigeria. *The Reign of Wazobia* challenges the practice of not allowing women to assume leadership position. In the three plays Onwueme engenders women with power, imbuing them with the paraphernalia of authority to participate in shaping their society towards sustainable development.

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