



## **Protest in Nigerian Feminist Drama and Theatre. Eziechine, Augustine Obiajulu .....**

**Abstract :** Drama is a vital medium for articulating and interpreting the realities and aspirations of the society. It is used to portray and interpret the historical, sociological, political, economic and cultural issues of the day. Thus, the playwright does not operate in a vacuum but mirrors the needs of his society in his works. In the light of contemporary realities, Nigerian playwrights, employ protest drama as a medium of expressing the struggles and aspirations of the oppressed masses in society today. Protest themes feature prominently in the works of male dramatists like Wole Soyinka, Kole Onotoso, Clark-Bekederemo, Femi Osofisan and Ola Rotimi. However, the last few decades in Nigeria witnessed the emergence of feminist drama written by Nigerian female dramatists whose plays protest against the customary relegation of the African women to the background. This work therefore seeks to examine this new trend in protest drama.

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ENIGMATIC, ARGUMENTATIVE ORBITALITY  
Protest in Nigerian Feminist Drama and Theatre

Introduction

Drama is a vital medium of human interaction suited for making deep psychological probes into the conscience of the society. The use of the dramatic medium as a means of propagating ideologies and the struggles for the control of the conscience of man has been noted by writers like Nngugi Wa Thiong'o for example, who sees drama as one of the most potent media in the struggle against cultural oppression and neo-colonialism in Africa. It is also a decisive weapon for galvanizing the masses towards radical socio-economic changes. This is attested to by the phenomenal success of his play *Megakika Mdeeda*, particularly the dust it raised between the Kenyan folks and the government when it was performed (Alidu 1)

Nigerian playwrights employ protest drama as a medium of expressing the struggles and aspirations of the oppressed masses in the society today. Mabel Tobiase (now Ewriethoma: 1998), agrees with the above assertion as she sees protest drama as a radical aspect of theatre that is popular in dramas of

ideology which highlight feminism. This type of theatre advocates for emancipation and a radical change from the status quo.

Women and Protest Drama

The last few decades in Nigeria witnessed the emergence of feminist and womanist drama written by African female dramatists and some patronizing male dramatists whose plays protest the customary relegation of the African woman to the background in the patriarchal and traditional society of Africa where generally the voice of the woman is heard but she is never seen, since she is tucked away in the kitchen to handle cooking and other domestic chores in the home, a fact reflected by the early novels of Achebe, Soyinka, Eieschi Amadi and other male writers (Agho 19). The late arrival of female writers to the African literary scene according to Agho, generally favoured the perpetuation of this relegation, which is countered in the works of African female writers using the parameters of feminism and its African outgrowth especially womanism or gynocriticism.

The plays (dramas) under this tradition of writing do not only talk about the relegation of women in this patriarchal society but also highlight the plights of women in the hands of men, especially as it concerns the issues of barrenness, the agony of motherhood, the oddities surrounding widowhood rites, the devastating effects of female genital mutilation, the high premium accorded the male child at the expense of the girl child and other oppressive cultural practices such as polygamy, child marriage, gender relations and semantic degradation of women. African radical feminist writers create strong liberated female protagonists who dwarf the men into insignificance in industry, educational pursuits and other spheres of life, and they usually present a debased picture of masculinity in their novels. As expected, the body of works produced under this tradition of writing, in the words of Agho (2011), "internalizes within their constitution a rhetorical vengeance defined by protest." We shall at this juncture, examine the treatment of some of the aforementioned cultural

practices in the works of some female dramatists.

#### The Issues of Barrenness

In African tradition, barrenness is often viewed as a curse, a failure and a reward for a wayward life. The barren woman receives no sympathy from the community. She is called names and is the first to be accused when any disaster that affects children occurs. A woman is stripped of her sexual identity when she is childless, for motherhood affirms the African myth that legitimizes female cultural power and only motherhood can confirm your identity as a woman in Africa (Stratton 95). The theme of motherhood is used to shape women's subjectivity and sexual identity. Corroborating this, Nfah (1997) observes that gender identity is always portrayed as biologically achieved through childbirth and nurturing, particularly if it is a male child.

Women writers have often written about women's struggles with the institution of marriage and motherhood where the heads of these institutions are men. Being childless is often seen as a taboo with

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the women being mistreated by the society. This is what prompts Ogunjipe-Leslie to say, "The way African writers are enthused about motherhood, one wonders if there are no women who hate childbirth or have undeveloped maternal instincts" (cited in Nfah 36). Proverbs such as seen below are also used to perpetuate the desperation and agony a woman goes through when she is childless even when she is actually not the one at fault. Here, Ubi in Salami-Agunloye's *The Queen Sisters* says... "Unless the barren woman gives birth, the oracle will know no peace..." (25). Ukindebo's proverb in *The Queen Sisters* testifies to this fact: "After all, the only reason why a woman marries a man is to bear children. Yes, children that you can call your own" (37).

This assertion goes to support the fact that women are socialized to accept the roles cut out for them as procurators of society.

Ubi, in *The Queen Sisters* 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. Salami-Agunloye in this play and Uboh Tracy in *Our Wives Have Come Mad Again*, interrogate the patriarchal notion of motherhood in their respective societies, reconceptualize female sterility as a feminist strategy. They challenge the conventional male representation of women as mothers. The reason for childlessness is often attributed to the wife. Uboh Tracy subverts this in her play *Our Wives Have Come Mad Again*, when Ene accuses her husband Yang of infertility. A man is never believed to be infertile. No matter the affection or contribution the woman has made to that marriage, when she cannot produce a child, all her effort in building the home is in vain. African society regards her as having failed as a woman. It is only in recent times that our society has started coming to terms with reality of things, such as low sperm count and male impotence which in the past was not thought of. In *Emotion*, Eki, a co-market woman calls Emotan a witch, because she is barren. "Let her bring my daughter for me before she

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bewitches her"(56). However, Salami-Agunloye in *Emotan* challenges the societal stance against women who cannot have biological children, by the brood of children who follow after Emotan chanting the pangeyric "IyeEmotan, (meaning, Mother Emotan), mother of a thousand children..." (45). As the Oba eulogizes Emotan at death, he says of her, "Emotan, though you had no children of your own, you will be remembered more than a woman with a hundred children (95) Salami deconstructs motherhood in this play by giving it a secondary importance to women's economic empowerment. By making Emotan happy, fulfilled, courageous and strong in spite of her childlessness, Salami-Agunloye challenges the African culture that disregards women without children. For her, women's self worth can be found outside motherhood.

In *Our Wife is not a Woman*, by Stella Oyejoko, Dupe is insulted thus, "...is your madam a woman? To me she is not. Do you call her a woman? She is not a woman..." (34). The conflict in the play is generated because of the inability of

Kola's wife, to bear a child. The mother-in-law, Mama, calls Dupe all sorts of names as a result of this. Being forced to accept what seems to be her fate, out of frustration, and a broken heart, Dupe laments that Mama has made "my infertility a fertile ground to sow her diabolical seeds" (78). Here, Oyejoko shows us graphically the travails of a childless woman.

In her play, *Awanyibufe*, Anuli Anuseth-Ajagu also draws our attention to the agony of a childless woman in Eastern Nigeria as in other parts of Africa. Chizeze, who has been married to Ogheneff is being thrown out of her home because she has never borne any child. As she leaves the house after she has been badly beaten up, she miraculously comes upon an abandoned baby with a note saying why the child was abandoned. She comforts herself and adopts the child and nurtures her, and she grows to become a great woman. Here, Anuseth-Ajagu, brings a new dimension to motherhood, implying that motherhood does not necessarily have to be through a biological process. In an authorial intrusion, she asserts:

A woman might be lucky to conceive and bear a child. Another by fate adopts a child. Both are one and the same, so long as the woman has a heart of a mother, and genuine love for her child (24).

By this, Ajagu reconstructs another style of motherhood, dismantling the concept of motherhood by institution and expanding the scope of motherhood by experience.

**Motherhood and Mothering**

In Africa, motherhood is regarded as supreme, the crowning glory of any woman. This perception of the African womanhood in the words of Salami-Agunloye (2011) does not in any way imply supremacy over anyone but rather reaffirms her subordination in the patriarchal structure. In African marriage, motherhood is the ultimate single manifestation of being a woman, and children crown this relationship. Motherhood certifies a woman's importance in her society. A woman's degree of authority in the society rests on how many children she has, especially sons who are regarded as lineage members.

Ewuetoma supports this assertion when she says that "a woman's link with her husband's family does not become strong until she has borne children who are lineage members"(41). One of the female heroes, Omesile in Onwuenne's *Shakara: Dance Hall Queen*, suffers a thwarted existence because of her inability to bear male children who can be regarded as lineage members. Any married woman without a child especially a male child she can call her own is not fully accepted in her marital home, and may be forced to return to her natal home for reasons of this. Carle Boyce Davies confirms this phenomenon and says:

...In many African societies, motherhood defines womanhood. Motherhood, then is crucial to woman's status in African society. To marry and mother a child (a son preferably), entitles a woman to more respect from her husband's kinsmen for she can now be addressed as mother of... (243).

In African tradition, only motherhood can confirm the identity

of a woman. Motherhood gives cultural legitimacy to female power. These are the parameters for their survival. For the queens in the harem, in *The Queen Sisters*, motherhood is so ingrained in their psyche that they see no alternative to being denied of their matrimonial bed by Ubi. For them, motherhood is central to their identity. However, Ubi subverts this tradition that has enslaved and entrapped her co-queens by refusing to become pregnant. Ubi's refusal of the role of motherhood can only be understood within the context of sexual politics in which bearing children is inscribed and valued in the harem. For Ubi, every woman should be allowed to make choices about childbearing. I think this is the point that the feminist playwright Irene Salami-Agunloye is trying to make.

However, I do not agree totally with this submission. I believe that the yearning of every woman is to become a mother and even a grandmother some day. So the idea of making childbearing a choice because of women's feminist ideological leaning is not only un-African but also an abuse of the

privilege given to them by God to procreate. This perhaps explains the reason Flora Nwapa in her article "Women and Creative Writing in Africa" says that "Women are what they are because they can give life, they can procreate" (Nwapa 531). Nwapa however, adds that a woman who is denied this unique function of childbearing should not be weighed down but rather seek for an alternative way of getting fulfilled.

#### Widowhood Rites

Women are subjected to oppressive and dehumanizing widowhood practices especially in Africa. These practices vary from one culture to another and they include sleeping on bare floor, shaving the hair on the head and the pubic, eating from broken calabash, sitting on ashes, neglect of personal appearance and body hygiene. In some extreme cases, the widow is forced to drink water that has been region, used to wash her late husband's corpse and take an oath to prove her innocence or otherwise.

Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* centres primarily on these harmful widowhood practices. In the play, Ogwoma the widow of Adigwu

has to perform the widowhood rites by being confined to a room, hair shaven, sitting on the bare ground, covered in ashes and wearing mourning wrappers. She sleeps on a mat during the three months of mourning. In this state, many women are likely to fall into depression or undergo mental torture and emotional trauma. The most frustrating aspect of the whole scenario is that, in Africa, traditionally when a husband dies, the wife is suspected to be responsible for his death; it is believed that no one below the age of 100 years dies a natural death. This is the case with Ogwoma and Odibei as the play opens in *Wedlock of the Gods*. As soon as Adigwu, the son of Odibei dies, she suspects that Ogwoma, his wife is responsible for his death. Salami-Agunloye notes that Sofola's main concern in the play is to punish Ogwoma for committing "adultery" or for moving too far ahead of tradition, forgetting that it is this same tradition that compelled Ogwoma to marry a man she hardly knew or loved, giving up her lover Uloko, (Salami-Agunloye 52). In Rosemary

Asen's *The Woman in Black*, Eric is compelled to go through a series of widowhood rites, like drinking the water used in bathing her husband's corpse, to exonerate her from the accusation of being responsible for his death. Asen subverts this practice using the women's collective protest against it.

Any culture that retards progress is inimical to the people who practice such a culture. Salami-Agunloye contends that such a cultural practice should be discarded. As she puts it:

When a cultural practice stifles an individual's personal desire, freedom of choice, and destroys self-realization, then such a practice has reached the stage of "cultural menopause"; it has outlived its usefulness and therefore must be discarded (52).

#### Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Female Circumcision

FGM is a traditional practice in which a girl/woman cuts off parts or whole organs of the female genitalia usually with a knife or razor blade which may be sterilized. The cultural justification for the practice of FGM varies across the

country. It is considered, variously as a cleansing ritual from evil spirits, a female rite of passage, a guarantor of a woman's chastity and her marriage ability, and a boost to fertility or to male sexual pleasure. Julie Okoh paints this picture in her play *Edeuwe*. The older women including Ehbikere, Edeuwe's mother-in-law see nothing wrong with circumcision even though it has led to the death of many young girls, including her granddaughter.

Edeuwe sees circumcision as a destroyer. Here, we see the conflict between the older generation of women who advocate for the perpetuation of the culture and the younger generation who see the culture as irrelevant, outdated and destructive.

Ehbikere:  
You are misleading her with your blab-blab talk. No wonder she is afraid of circumcision. My granddaughter, do not listen to her vile tongue. Circumcision is a thing of joy, prestige and cultural identity (6).  
Edeuwe: ... circumcision has brought tears to my eyes many times.  
Edeuwe: I know that it is a destroyer. It killed my daughter, Ize  
Agrieved by her defiance of culture, Ehbikere responds by saying

"...you cannot throw sand on our traditions like that. I warn you. She who gathers a bundle of trouble carries it on her head" (7).

Julie Okoh creates Edeuwe as the new woman, who challenges the age-long cultural practice, which hitherto, many women have been silent about, despite their displeasure about the practice. She is determined to eradicate the practice even though she is faced with several challenges. Edeuwe's husband, Orida reminds her that, it is difficult to give up an age-long tradition". She replies thus:

Nothing remains the same forever. Like the westside of the sea, like the night and day, season succeeds season giving way to new. Today we must choose our value and live by them. Tomorrow comes another season, another choice. Man is what he does in his time. Circumcision has lost its old value (15).

Warning her of the consequences of her action, Orida says: "Wede, severing a people from their culture is just like separating those children wrapped up in scuffle". He later adds, "You might be destroyed in the process" (25). Determined Edeuwe says, "What a noble death to die" (25) Julie Okoh strongly believes that circumcision alone does not

impart anything. Rather, it is accompanied with pains. She condemns the view that women who are not circumcised turn to flirts. According to her, "It is the mind, attraction and chemical reaction of the body...not the cutting of the clitoris that would determine the level of a woman's promiscuity" (Okoh 10). She warns that the effect of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is Vasioo Vaginal Fistula (VVF), which is devastating to the lives of women generally. She therefore protests strongly against the practice of female genital mutilation as well as girl child abuse.

already in love with Uloko. Her brother is very ill and in need of traditional medical attention. As the family has no alternative source of fund, Ogwoma is traded in marriage to Adigwu and her bride-price is used for her brother's treatment.

Re-enacting the place of tradition, Anwasia, Ogwoma's friend remarks:  
Anwasia:  
Ogwoma, our people say that a man's daughter is a source of wealth to him. Your parents needed the money for your expensive sacrifice for your brother whom sickness almost killed.

As far as Ogwoma's parents are concerned, her fulfillment in life and whom she marries is irrelevant. Their main concern is for her brother.  
In *Edeuwe* by Julie Okoh, Edeuwe is confronted with similar challenge, where she is compelled by tradition to bear a male child to safeguard her matrimonial home. She attempted several times to have male children without success. The only one she has dies from a snake bite. Her mother-in-law ridicules her: "Having only one child is like having none at all. And a girl too (Hiasing) chiew. Nonsense". The society sees women without a male child as a failure. She loses out on

**Male Child Preference**

In many patrilineal African societies, the concept of primogeniture is embedded in the cultural system and as such property inheritance is usually through the first son, no matter his position in the hierarchy of children. Male child preference is derived from this concept. Here, the male child or children is/are favoured above the female children. The family's attention is usually more focused on the male than on the female.

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inheritance in a home she has invested so much in.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that female protest drama has been employed by Nigerian female playwrights to protest against myriads of situations affecting women. Julie Okoh in *Edewede* protests against female circumcision. Zulu Sofola in *Wedlock of the Gods* protests against forced marriage/motherhood. In *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, Tracie Utoh protests against the oppression of women. In *Emotan*, Irene Salami protests against injustice while Onwueme in the *Reign of Wazobia* protests against male domination, etc. With these protests against the status quo, women writers are beginning to initiate a process of change in their societies.

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