

Protest and Conflict in African Literature: The Nigerian Experience Expressed in Selected Plays by Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme

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Abstract

The prevailing social situation in a society at any given time determines the temperament of its literature. African literature of the post-independence period is generally reactive in temperament. This emergent trend in African literature is as a result of the prevailing economic, social and political situations in most African nations. In Nigerian society, for instance, there is inequality, injustice, unemployment, hunger, marginalization, environmental degradation, corruption, political instability, socio-economic ills and religious violence. Obviously, these suffocating experiences are bound to generate protests and conflicts arising from people who are dissatisfied. Drama and prose have been mostly deployed to confront these unjust and inhuman situations. However, this paper focuses mainly on the selected plays authored by Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme. The study is basically a survey of Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme's selected plays which explore the thematic concern of this paper. Content analysis of the plays reveals that protest can be used to resist and protest all oppressive structures in society.

Keywords: Protest, women, conflict, inequality, drama

Introduction

Protest is an assertive demonstration of commitment to the continuous growth and progress of any society. It is usually the last legitimate alternative that humans deploy to confront unjust and inhuman situations. It is used as a

weapon to fight oppression and dehumanization. In Nigeria, such unjust and inhuman situations suffered by the people have in most cases forced many civil groups to the streets to protest against the perpetrators of evil deeds in society. Drama, particularly, is a medium of human interaction suited for making deep psychological probes into the conscience of the society. As a medium of human interaction, drama can be used as a means of propagating ideologies and the struggles for the control of the conscience of man. Thus, drama can be employed as an ideological weapon of collective struggle and as an instrument of demolishing the squalid institutions that exploit and degrade humanity (Asen 2015: 136). In other words, it can be used to resist and protest all oppressive structures in society. Drama can also be used as a means of creating social, cultural and political awareness. According to Freire (1975: 14), "to accept dehumanization as a historical vocation would lead either to cynicism or to total despair." Corroborating the above statement, Agho (1999: 73), argues that "because dehumanization is a distortion of not being fully human, sooner or later, being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so." Protest is deployed to accomplish this liberation task, which Freire (1975: 21), calls "the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed."

Mohan advances several reasons and conditions that are bound to trigger off a protest action. According to the author,

The awareness of protest arises when man confronts an unjust and inhuman situation. It takes birth when a man decides to get rid of the slave mentality. The foundation of protest is laid when man becomes conscious of his rights and for their attainment puts himself body and soul into the struggle; consciousness towards fundamental rights, tendency to struggle and a sense of independence and liberty are the basic ingredients of protest which are liable to come into conflict with the dread power of the establishment. And in this process, human anguish comes into being which raises protest. (Mohan 1975: 92).

Protest, therefore, is simply a means of effecting change and establishing a society where justice and fair play will prevail. It is bound to take place when people are dissatisfied.

The History of Women Protest in Nigeria

Women involvement in social protest has been an age long tradition. In Nigeria, for instance, women have risen at different periods to protest for their rights. In 1929, the Aba Women riot, which is also known as the Women's war of 1929, was witnessed in Nigeria. The riot was carried out by market women and house wives in Owerri and Calabar to protest against the unjust imposition of taxes on women by the colonial authority. The protest succeeded in giving women representation in government.

This feat was replicated by Abeokuta women during the Abeokuta Women's Revolt (also called the Egba Women's Tax Riot) which was a resistance movement led by the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) in the late 1940s, under the leadership of Fumilayo Ransome-Kuti. The union revolted against the imposition of unfair taxation by the Nigerian colonial government. The women observed that under colonial administration, their economic roles were declining while their taxes were increasing. The women also insisted that until they were granted representation in the local government, they should not be required to pay taxes separately from men. As a result of their protests, four women were given seats in the local council, and the taxation of women was stopped.

Women of the post-colonial Nigeria have also taken up the responsibility of ensuring favourable conditions for their communities. In 1984, Ogharefe women's uprising attacked and seized control of a U.S. oil corporation's production site. Ekpan Women also acted similarly by shutting down the core of the whole region's industry demanding compensation for the destruction of their land, and jobs in the oil industry for their children. In 2007, the Ado Ekiti women in Nigeria protested against the evil of electoral malpractice perpetrated in their Local Government elections. The elections which were a rerun after faulty elections in 2007 concluded without the release of results coupled with the antics of officials suggesting an attempt to thwart the democratic will of the people. The naked women, who were mostly older women, took to the streets to challenge the delay in releasing the results of the election. It is unfortunate that these women had to resort to this traditional taboo in order to have their opinions heard. However, the protest is crucial for the entrenchment of democratic principle because it fulfils a crucial aspect of democracy- the people voicing their opinion in an effort to affect political outcomes.

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The "Bring Back our Girls" protest of 2014 is still fresh in our memory. On the 5th of May, 2014, Channels Television reported that aggrieved mothers, fathers and relatives of the young school girls abducted on April 14 by suspected members of the Boko Haram sect from their school in Chibok, Borno State, gathered at the Eagle Square, Abuja, asking the government to take drastic actions to rescue the girls. From the Square they took their protest to the National Assembly in the hope that their efforts would see to the release of their children. This protest generated a popular message, "Bring Back Our Girls", world over.

One of the most dreaded protests held in recent time was the "#EndSars" protest of October, 2020. The protest which swept across the country was staged by several thousands of Nigerian youths and women against police brutality. The youths took to the streets after a video went viral of a man allegedly being killed by the notorious special Anti-Robbery Squad (Sars)1. The efforts of the youths finally translated into what appeared to be a nationwide demonstration of October 2020.

Literature and Protest

Literature cannot be separated from society. At any given time, literature mirrors the current social situation of any given place. According to Wellek and Warren (1956: 94), "literature is a social institution, using as its medium language, a social creation". Literature and protest therefore, are both social phenomena, since they emerge from society. The prevailing social situation of a society at any given time determines the temperament of its literature.

Corroborating this position, Mao (1967: 25) posits that:

In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics.

Louis (1969: 109) reiterates this position maintaining that:

In situations as explosive as that of Africa today there can be no creative literature that is not in some way political, in some way

protest. Even the writer who opts out of the social struggles of his country and tries to create a private world of art, is saying something controversial about the responsibility of the artist to society.

It is clear from the above quotations that protest and literature are closely related as they share similar aims and objectives. Literature is a body of written, verbal or performed work which exercises the imagination and seeks to offer insights into the nature of the world and the place of humans in it. Protest on the other hand, can be said to refer to those mass movements, private initiatives, demonstrations and other activities which support or oppose specific development or situations in a given society with a view to changing them for the better. Thus, Louis' argument that protest is always present at some level in any work of literature, regardless of whether it is stated or implied has become clearer.

Nwazuloha Sofola (Zulu Sofola) was the first published female playwright in Nigeria. It is a credit to Sofola's legacy as the first female playwright in Nigeria that she invaded a "male genre" (as a dramatist and a director), disrupted the monologist discourses of male playwrights like Soyinka, Clark, Osofisan, Sowande, among many others, and deposited powerful women on the African stage. As a female writer, she questions the choice of spouses in *Wedlock of the Gods*; shows polygamy as a conflict situation for women in *King Emene*; frowns against marriage as a social obligation in *Memories in the Moonlight*; unravels the negative impact of European culture in *The Sweet Trap*; ridicules the moral bankruptcy of the elite in *Song of a Maiden*; celebrates the power of courageous women in *Queen Omu-Ako of Oligbo* and raises an alarm on the exploitation of women in *The Showers and Lost Dreams*. (Emenyi, 2005:90) In her artistic creations, Sofola upholds the sustaining power of tradition and condemns female assertion outside the African cultural context.

In *King Emene*, a newly enthroned king has been warned not to perform the rites ushering in the peace week because of a heinous crime that has been committed in the king's palace. Emene's mother has actually killed the rightful heir to the throne in order for her son to become the king. Emene is not aware of this, but instead of him, having been alerted, to investigate the matter, he accuses the elders of plotting to overthrow him. He continues with the rites but is driven off the shrine by a boa after which he commits suicide.

King Emene is a tragic play which deals with a serious and sorrowful subject matter – the catastrophe of a foolhardy king. There is a conflict of duty. Duty to the King's immediate relations conflicts with duty to the state and its legally constituted authority which must be obeyed, for the stability and safety of every community depends on this. The King's stubborn determination to protect his mother is morally unsound. His resentment of the criticisms of the elders and the subsequent clash of personalities, principles and intentions culminate in his personal catastrophe but the whole community is affected as well (Unoh1981: 105)

In the *Wedlock of the Gods*, Uloko and Ogwoma, the radical couple, although genuinely in love, cannot marry because Uloko cannot afford the bride price. Since Ogwoma's parents need money at the time to cure her sick brother, she is married to Adigwu, a higher bidder, but much against her wish. Shortly after the marriage, Adigwu dies and the lovers resume their love relationship without waiting for the traditionally prescribed mourning period to lapse. This attracts the wrath of Ogwoma's mother-in-law, Odibei. In order to enable tradition to run its course and also to avenge the death of her son who she believes is killed by the lovers in order that they might have their way, Odibei uses her magical spell to destroy Ogwoma. Uloko however, avenged Ogwoma's death by killing Odibei and commits suicide after that.

It is clear from *The Wedlock of the Gods* that the playwright herself believes that it is unjust to snatch Ogwoma from Uloko simply because he cannot afford the bride price. When Ogoli cries of shame after it has been discovered that her son has impregnated Ogwoma while still in her period of mourning, Uloko queries her:

It was in your presence that Ogwoma was forced from my hands and given away to Adigwu. Did you speak for me? Did you let Ibekwe know that an injustice was being done to you by his action? Did you let anyone know that, for money, the wife whom you had planned for your son was being forced from your hands and being given to someone else? (42)

This is Sofola's voice protesting through Uloko against the injustice done to the couple. But in spite of this, Sofola still believes that they must die. Going against the tradition is a prime crime for which one must pay the supreme

price. Again, during the family discussion over the disgrace brought by Ogwoma to the family, Udo, one of the family members, observes:

When Diokpa Ibekwe was giving Ogwoma to her husband, she came to me several times in tears because she did not want to marry Adigwu. She begged me many times to talk to her father about it. I did so without any success. Ibekwe did not want to listen because, as he said, it was he who fathered Ogwoma and it was he who gave her away. Brother, when the matter almost caused trouble between me and Ibekwe, I swallowed everything else. Ogwoma was led to her husband still *protesting* and I did not as much as look (*italics mine*) through the door to see if she was tied and carried to Adigwu or whipped along the way like a ram to the altar. (26)

The Showers is a dramatization of gender conflict over the negligence women receive as the life-giving and nurturing forces in the human society. However, Sofola in the words of Emenyi (2005: 96) upholds positive parts of tradition which is why her Christian belief has a liberating impact on the woman who, according to Genesis 1:26-27, is a manifestation of the "Godhead: God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." Using Mrs. Adebekun and Mrs. Oteri, the playwright portrays the neglect of women by their husbands during childbirth as well as reflects how "fathers literally have their daughters for the highest bidder" in marriage transactions. *The Showers* is not just an exposition of female exploitation, but a protest meant to sensitize the public on the need to avert an impending national crisis.

Tess Onwueme, a professor of global letters, is arguably one of the leading Nigerian female dramatists today. Her plays highlight issues that impact on women particularly and the society in general. *The Broken Calabash* is indubitably Onwueme's proper arrival into the radical feminist realm. The play dramatizes family tensions underlining the subject of the clash or conflict between the values, institutions and practices of old Africa and those attendants on the growing westernization of the African. In the play, Ona, a university undergraduate, is an *Idegbe* 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 outcasts. 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, at 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 (Amuta 1989:54).

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 ? (PP. 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." This is a way of illustrating the truism that a 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" (P72).

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 (Amuta 1989: 55).

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 the 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.

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, 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" (Amuta, 1989: 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 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" (P.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 *Ire* festival. According to Amuta, 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 a hedonist who seeks for enjoyment at most times (Ewrierhoma 2002). 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 that 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 (P.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 (P.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.

Then She Said It is set in a fictional state called Hungeria. In this play, the playwright expresses her concern for the sustenance of the family and the collaboration of the sexes to combat issues of oppression and bad leadership in Nigeria and the entire developing world. "Hiding" under the umbrella of the feminist discourse, Onwueme exposes the ills of the local and international politics of oil exploration in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. The concern for women is obvious in that they turn to be the ultimate victims, losing husbands and children, suffering rape along with their daughters, among others, in the fictional nation of Hungeria.

The environmental degradation and misuse of the eco system by oil companies in the area deal a heavy blow on the economic activities of the people living there. As a result of this, they are reduced to the beggarly status of scrounging for jobs in these oil companies. Their farms can no longer yield any harvest because the soil has been affected by oil pollution. The rivers are also not yielding any harvest of fish, given that most of the waters have been poisoned by this same chemical pollution as a result of careless and indiscriminate oil spillage. They do not have clean drinking water. The dialogue between Obida and Niger captures this sorry state of affairs:

- Obida: They've killed everything with their pollution and oil spillage. We cannot breathe clean air. Fish die or get fried in the simmering rivers. Water-water everywhere. But we have no clean water to drink! And now we have no land too!
- Niger: No firewood because the plants and trees are soaked in oil. What do they expect us to cook with? (P.15)

Onwueme uses the names of rivers to represent characters in her play. Contextually, Oji indicates the southern Eastern Igbo speaking area; Oshun symbolizes the Western axis of Nigeria; Kainji, the middle belt; River Benue, the Northern region of Nigeria. Methuselah (2010:118) opines that "the selection of natural formations cutting across the gamut of Nigeria signifies the national outlook of the problem in question." He further states that Atlantic, in the play, an apt signification of the Western industrialized nations, as presented by the oil corporations in concert with the local leadership, are purveyors of nothing but sufferings.

The role of traditional rulers typified by Ethiope, who also colludes with these agencies of exploitation, is discussed. The playwright indicts these royal personages, showing them to be part of the problem, even when they are supposed to be protectors of the people. The issue of oil, a very contentious and highly emotional issue within the Nigerian political arena, oil pollution and environmental degradation all come to play a significant role in this thought-provoking play.

The play, notes Methuselah (2010: 118) "is a celebration of the courage and resilience of a people as they revolt against tyranny and oppression of their leaders." The play supports the argument that the collective will of the people

cannot be silenced, no matter the level of intimidation. It is also a warning that there is a level to which a people can be suppressed. The apocalyptic vision of this play captures the present reality of the Niger Delta problem. Although the play was written about ten years ago, the playwright was able to foresee the deteriorating situation that has become so much a centre of attention today.

The play opens in an atmosphere of frenzy and chaos. The military are on rampage, killing and maiming people in a commando style reminiscent of the brutish and repressive attitude of many African leaders who will rather roll out tanks against poor defenceless people, instead of rolling out development plans for their betterment. These rampaging armies of destruction often find women and children as their easy prey because of their vulnerability in times of hostilities. Consequently, they run for cover, cowering in fear and confusion. In this circumstance many of them get killed, raped or brutalized one way or the other. Onwueme in this play imbues the women with an intrepid spirit and a resolve to fight these forces of oppression against them. This courage also helps to propel the struggle forward, galvanizing the mass populace and rousing them from the state of inertia and fatalism.

Women play a pivotal role in the struggle against the forces of oppression in *Then She Said It*. Onwueme establishes this right from the start of the play. Indeed, the effort to free Hungeria from the forces of oppression is championed by women and the youths. Methuselah (2010: 121) sees this as a great indictment of the older generation who has been projected as colluding on the opposite side with multinational companies to keep the people perpetually enslaved and emasculated". Instead of populating the play with the usual titanic male heroes engaged in daring adventures, a characteristic of most plays of the earlier generation, the revolt against oppressive powers in the *Then She Said It* is masterminded by women.

The stentorian voices of dissent by these women run through the gamut of the play. They are not passive but actively plan and strategize with the youths on how to address the terrible situation people in Hungeria have found themselves in. In Movement three, a typical situation attendant in Hungeria is revealed. The situation is that Hungarians experience long queues in petrol stations. The point of emphasis by the playwright perhaps rests in the role women play within this dispensation. This is portrayed even by the stage direction in the beginning of the movement:

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(Obida pushes her way through the chaotic line, goes over, pumps and plays with the empty fuel hose. A male voice shouts "Yes Sistah. Pump am! Pump am well-well! I dey your side". (P.14)

Thus, while the men remain in the side-lines unable to initiate any course of action, women summon the courage to protest. These women are portrayed as being resilient and daring in their confrontation. Methuselah paints a picture of the women's courage and their daring attitude at the scene of the petrol station when he says:

They do not grovel at the feet of the petrol attendant who attempt to intimidate them. Fearlessly, they denounce him and when he threatens to whip Obida, they resist this by forming a human shield around her. His belligerence fails to frighten the women. Instead they succeed in discovering where the petrol is and initiated the process of pumping it. (2010:121)

Even the arrival of the police officer at the scene does not silence the women. There is confusion once again. In the ensuing scuffle, Obida, in her youthful exuberance grabs the policeman's gun and would have used it against him but for the quick intervention of Niger who warns that too much blood has already been spilled. Obida, in her revolutionary zeal, urges the women to free themselves from the clutches of servitude. The Police are called in, and in their usual predictable fashion, they use excessive force and brutality to disperse the crowd.

Obida, who has clearly demonstrated her leadership qualities, is however, undaunted. In spite of the clash, she had with the police earlier on, the next time we see her, she is organizing the women and youths to protest in front of the GRA/Oil club.

Oshun, the mistress of Atlantic, forced into that life because of the circumstances of an employment, also plays a pivotal role in the struggle against exploitation. She manipulates Atlantic and gets her boyfriend a job in the oil company. She does this so as to be able to keep tabs on Atlantic. In spite of her disadvantaged status, she never hesitates to confront Atlantic and remind him of his brutality on her people. Oshun is among the numerous young girls in

Hungeria who are exploited by the rich and powerful foreigners who flaunt money to trap them into sexual relationships. She, therefore, represents the exploited people of Hungeria who have been rendered powerless in their own country. Atlantic, on the other hand, represents the powerful foreign investors who exploit the people in their land.

However, it must be noted that Onwueme is not encouraging prostitution here. Rather, she has "realistically captured the desperate situation that young girls like Oshun is subjected to" Methuselah (2010). After graduating from school, many of them are unable to secure jobs. They are forced into unwholesome trade to be able to keep body and soul together. Young girls like Oshun in frustration are willing to sell themselves off; a direct indictment of the society by the playwright where hard work does not necessarily pay. In the words of Methuselah, Oshun like Obida

Is not the usual run-of-the mill, pliable female character. She is a hard nut to crack; ferocious and courageous. She is not cowed by Atlantic in spite of his elevated status. She sees herself as an equal to him and so does not grovel at his feet. (2010 : 123).

Movement Nine presents a very powerful moving scene where the women incensed by the brutality of the government now organize themselves in fury and overrun the GRA/OIL club. Even though they are met with police superior fire power, this does not deter them in any way. In a true spirit of heroism, the women march on gallantly to the GRA/OIL club. In spite of the disproportionate use of force by the law enforcement agents, the women are able to kidnap Atlantic but the sheer force of the police overwhelms them. Many of them are arrested. In the international court, however, they are acquitted of any wrong doing. The gallantry of this motley crowd of women yields great results as they succeed in bringing to justice the plunderers of their country.

According to Akoh, *Then She Said It* "is built on the factual story of the ordeal of the women in Odi and Choba in Rivers and Bayelsa States of Nigeria". He further stresses that Onwueme uses the play to interrogate the paradox of Nigeria as an oil producing nation and yet suffers from it. Metaphorically, the women's position represents the playwright's castigation of local collaborators in the enslavement of the nation by the foreign powers. Atlantic, the foreign

Director of the GRA/OIL club confesses: "this bloody country without a leader? Don't you blame me. I take what I get. After all, your so-called leaders gave me the power" (P.53). The playwright's message then becomes clearer beyond a feminist revolt to a call to all in the fight against all forms of dominations. This is why the elderly women reconcile with their educated young and rebellious daughters to discard the usual "man-woman palaver" (P.60) to seek a better life for all oppressed men and women.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that Nigerian writers, especially female dramatists, have shifted progressively in their creative adventure from historical documentation to radical praxis in her artistic creations. Zulu Sofola upholds tradition and condemns female assertion outside the African cultural context. Tess Onwueme also protests against the forces of oppression, exploitation and dehumanization in her works. The paper maintains that protests act as warning that impacts future attempts by leaders to circumvent and subvert the will of the people.

Notes

1. Azeizat Olaoluwa (2020) "ENDSARS Protest: The Nigerian women leading the fight for change" Reported by Azeizat Olaoluwa, Women Affairs Reporter, BBC News West Africa on the December 1, 2020
2. Tess Onwueme (1984), Introductory notes to the premiere of *The Broken Calabash*, P.11

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