

## Female Dramat/Ists as Voices of Conscience: The Example of Irene Salami Agunloye and Tess Onwueme

Eziechine Augustine Obiajulu  
Department of English,  
University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State  
ezeichineauguste@gmail.com

### Abstract

The post-colonial African literature is reactive in temperament. This trend in African literature centres on the need for writers to make use of their art as tools of liberation, mobilization and conscientization. This ideological position has found practical expression in the works of most Nigerian female dramatists who see their works as social documents which can be used as a means of propagating ideologies geared toward equilibrating the inequalities in Nigerian society, and the struggles for the control of the conscience of man. Some of these Nigerian female dramatists include: Tess Onwueme, Irene Salami- Agunloye, Stella Oyedpo, Julie Okoh amongst others. However, this paper focuses mainly on the works of two leading Nigerian female dramatists namely, Tess Onwueme and Irene Salami-Agunloye who have produced outstanding works on the issues of gender balance and equity. The study is basically a survey of Tess Onwueme and Irene Salami-Agunloye's selected plays which explore the thematic concern of this paper. Content analysis of the plays reveals that Tess Onwueme and Irene Salami- Agunloye employ drama as a tool of liberation, mobilization and conscientization .

**Keywords:** Liberation, conscientization, inequality, equity, mobilization.

### Introduction

African literature of post-colonial expression is reactive in temperament. It is employed as a veritable tool of liberation, mobilization and conscientization. Drama as a form of African literature, is used as a medium of human interaction, suitable for probing the conscience of society. As a medium of human interaction, drama can be used as a means of propagating ideologies and controlling the actions of people. 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 the society. Drama can also be used as a means of creating social, cultural and political awareness.

Since its inception, Nigerian drama has arguably remained committed to interrogating social realities in the country. This social commitment is noticeable in the plays of dramatists across time. Their efforts demonstrate that the playwright does not operate in a vacuum. They capture and mirror realities in their society. It is against this background that Ezenwanebe (2006:1) describes playwrights as "vanguards of society keeping watchful eyes and attentive ears to the happenings in the society." The plays of Tess Onwueme and Irene Salami Agunloye particularly are concerned with changing the individual and the collective conscience of a people as well as their activities, their lives and their environment towards sane society. Their plays show the potentials of drama as a powerful medium of reshaping society that has gone out of tune with acceptable socio-political and cultural values. Tess Onwueme for instance, can

be considered as a female revolutionary dramatist who uses her play texts to instill the spirit of revolution in women. As a voice of conscience, her plays highlight and interrogate issues that impact on women particularly and the society in general.

Voice of conscience, in the context of this paper, refers to the works of dramatists in general which seek to find solutions to the affairs of the modern world that is fraught with myriads of problems. For instance, in Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, the problem of racial discrimination in the then apartheid regime of South Africa is captured. In *A play of grants* and *Opera Wonyosi*, Wole Soyinka rebukes his society so as to reform it. The play is an indictment of the bourgeois morality that assailed both the poor and the rich in Nigerian society of a particular time (Bamidole, 2000). Emeka Nwabueze is another important Nigerian dramatist of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His *A Parliament of Vultures* is a scathing attack on the Nigerian legislatures whom he describes as vultures. He exposes their moral and intellectual weaknesses as well as the flaws in the Nigerian political system. Femi Osofisan also exposes the causes of violence, especially armed robbery in *Once Upon Four Robbers*, a play described by Gbileka (1997:94) as "a radical sociology of crime, an exposition of the struggle of the oppressed masses to liberate themselves from tyranny of the wealthy class.

From the female angle, we have the works of Tess Onwueme, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Julie Okoh, Stella Oyedepo and many others. Julie Okoh's *Edewede*, for instance, captures a traumatizing experience of women and the imposition of a cultural practice that serves as a control measure on women. Stella Oyedepo's *On His Demise*, on the other hand, is a plaintive cry on the plight of women in Nigeria. In *Her Brain Has No Gender*, Oyedepo argues that women are as much intelligent as men. These and many more are the voices of conscience seeking to reshape their society. But our major concern in this paper, is on selected works of Tess Onwueme and Irene Salami-Agunloye.

### Conceptual Framework

The theories that foreground this paper are the theories of Radical feminism and African Womanism. Radical feminism is a category of gender resistance feminism which think that the gendered social order is so oppressive to women and that women should not cooperate with it. Radical feminism advocates social change through the collective will of the masses.

Salami-Agunloye's concept of radical feminism cited in Lucas Joseph (2009:122) states that:

Patriarchy or male domination is responsible for or at the root of women's oppression and inequality...The Power relationships in society has been arranged to favour men, therefore it advocates for a change in this arrangement and a rejection of standard roles and male oppression...that men use social systems and other methods of control to perpetually subdue women and keep them in subordinate position.

The Womanist theory on the other hand preaches equality of all, irrespective of sex or gender in all things. (Chikwenye Ogunyemi (1998:65), one of the prominent literary propagators of female emancipation posits that:

Womanism is black-centred, it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism... It encourages meaningful union between black women and black men and children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand. (italics mine)

According to Akoh, (2008:55), African Womanism as a theory

Celebrates African womanhood. It valorises motherhood and mothering as a virtue and with a sense of power of the domain of woman. It is a philosophy which sees the woman as a woman while recognizing her definite roles which, in themselves, cannot stand without those of the man's and vice-versa...is opposed to the negation of womanhood for the attainment of a new status or height.

African womanism therefore, can be seen as an offshoot of the communality of traditional African societies that insists on the complementarity of the sexes.

### Exploring the Plays of Irene Salami Agunloye and Tess Onwueme as Voices of Conscience

#### Tess Onwueme

Tess Onwueme belongs to the second generation of Nigerian dramatists, the social alternative group. This group of dramatists advocate protest and revolt as approaches to enforce change. In *The Reign of Wazobia* for instance, Onwueme espouses the idea of women participation in politics. As Udenta (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 this play, Wazobia, Onwueme's major female character, champions the cause of the oppressed and initiates revolutionary changes for the progress of the society. Wazobia is a rebel who, through sheer determination and ruthlessness, succeeds in taking over the throne of Anioma kingdom. Her action was a total yet intriguingly subtle revolution.

In the play, Ogiso, the King of Anioma Kingdom, is dead. Tradition demands that the community appoints a young female regent to keep the throne warm for a period of three seasons, after which a permanent male from the royal family will be crowned king. The gods and oracle are consulted and Wazobia is chosen and installed as the regent. Wazobia assumes leadership, tastes power, likes it and refuses to relinquish it at the end of her regency. This play can be likened to J.P Clark's *Wives Revolt*. In this play, 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, women are projected to 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. Hence, 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 (p.2).

Inspired by the exhortation, 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. This is why the law prescribes a female regent.

While addressing the women at the palace-square, she raises many political and cultural issues that are as revolutionary as they are inciting. She questions the tradition that subjects women 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. She seeks answer to the reason why women should be beaten by men as if they are slaves or *fufu*. Her anger with the patriarchal order is expressed in the following words:

**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 (p.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. She points that they, too, 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 women to go into the world and make a living for themselves, with or without men. "This is obviously a new voice, a modern voice, and the voice of change, the voice of support, and encouragement for women." (Nwamuo, 2001:70)

The men resent this, organize themselves into opposition groups, hold series of meetings, conspire against her, but end up sabotaging themselves. With overwhelming support from the women, Wazobia consolidates her reign and wields absolute political power. The point that Onwueme has made here is that political power is not an exclusive preserve of men. Thus, she has awakened the collective consciousness of women to challenge the practice of not allowing women to assume leadership position. This new spirit of change constitutes the voice of conscience.

*Then she said it*, presents a more ideologically mature position on the playwright as voice of conscience. The playwright expresses Onwueme's concern with the sustenance of the family system and the need for collaboration of both sexes to combat oppression and bad leadership in Nigeria in the context of developing nations. Using the Womanist perspective, Onwueme exposes the ills of the local and international politics of oil exploration in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria (Akoh, 2008:63). The play according to 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 people can be suppressed. The apocalyptic vision of this play captures the present reality of the Niger Delta. Written about ten years ago, the playwright foresees the deteriorating socio-political condition of Nigeria.

The play is set in a fictional state named Hungeria, a metaphor for the oil rich Niger Delta Area, Nigeria. The names of all the characters are drawn from various rivers in Nigeria. The land of Hungeria produces enormous wealth, but the people continue to suffer hunger, poverty,

starvation and diseases. The people are being oppressed, exploited and marginalized. As the people could no longer bear their suffering, they resort to militant activism. Emerike (2015) observes that Onwueme, in *Then She Said It*, "highlights the Niger Delta crisis and the corruption through the collusion of multinational companies and their local collaborators used to commit economic crimes against the nation". The actions of the play take place in two locales within Hungeria: the GRA/Oil Club and the market square where the barricaded empty fuel station is located. The GRA/Oil Club which is a restricted area has all the nuances and trappings of affluence and upper-class habitation. There is a sharp contrast between the two locales. In the words of Affiah (2012), "while one set of people, the minority, live in opulence and obscene wealth, an other set of people live in squalor, poverty and disease". Affiah further maintains that the forces of oppression are represented by Atlantic, the foreign oil director; Kainji the government official and Ethiopie, the traditional chief.

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 have 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. Thus, while the men remain in the sidelines 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. (Methuselah, 2010, p.121)

Unemployment has reached a tragic proportion in Hungeria. University graduates roam the streets every year searching for non-existent jobs. Many young girls are pushed into prostitution as a result of unemployment. 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 are subjected to. (Methuselah, 2010:123). 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. (Methuselah, 2010:123).

History has shown that the oppressor would not freely let go the oppressed. More often than not, the oppressed would need to put up a tough and sometimes bloody fight of resistance (Affiah, 2012:292). Perhaps, this is why Onwueme encourages people who are under any form of oppression to rise up, protest and reclaim their humanity. No wonder, in movement

Nine, 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 overwhelm 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. (Methuselah, 2010:125)

According to Akoh (2008:63), *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. This is a protest play which involves the arrest and trial of women. But the verdict is in favour of women. The playwright's message here becomes clearer beyond a feminist revolt to a call to all in the fight against all forms of domination and exploitation.

### Voices of Conscience in Salami-Agunloye's *More than Dancing and Sweet Revenge*

Salami-Agunloye's *More than Dancing* attempts to rekindle the revolutionary consciousness of Nigerian women as it calls them to rise up to the challenges of the time. This is an obvious shift in the playwright's creative adventure from historical documentations to radical political activism. The playwright has made a political statement with the play, namely: that Nigerian women are capable of doing greater things than merely dancing at party rallies. The play opens with Madam Bisi, the leader of the women's wing of the United People's Liberation Party, protesting against the marginalization of women. When the women dance troupe is invited to perform, she rebukes them thus:

**Bisi:** Stop drumming! Stop dancing! Stop immediately! Stop! Stop, I say!!! Enough of dancing! Enough! Enough! Year in year out, primaries come and party elections go, all we do is dance. Is dancing all we can do? Is that all we are known for?..... Look at the high table (points at the top row where dignitaries are seated). How many women do you see up there? ... Look at us.... Dancing and collecting two bags of rice, one bag of salt, one carton of magi cubes and two wrappers to be shared among thirty-five women! Women, these are distractions (p.1).

She disperses the dancers and that makes the party elders angry with her. The women later meet to appraise the action of the previous day and most women support her and a few are skeptical about the radical nature of their action. They go ahead to select Professor Nona Odaro as their presidential candidate with a promise to support her in the election. Professor Nona goes home and rethinks the decision of her fellow women. She suddenly falls into a trance and the past Nigerian heroines appear to her with each encouraging her to lead the women. She wakes up and resolves to carry on the struggle. She declares:

**Nona:** I am ready! Here am I. I am ready to go all the way (p.29).

The action of the women gives the men some concerns. They also meet to re-strategize. They begin to complain thus:

**Balat:** The women have carried out their threat. They have gone ahead to present their own presidential candidate to the chairman.

**Sonsare:** They say they are tired of dancing. They claim they have been marginalized (p.30-31).

They also make fun of the women's demands. Hakeem advises them to allow the women a chance to rule since they have also come of age, but his advice is not taken seriously by the men.

In the next scene, Nona is in her office and her husband comes but he is denied entry. He fumes and finally barges into the office. Nona again contemplates dumping the women's mandate. At this point, she falls into a trance again and as usual foremothers who were historical heroines appear to her and encourage her to fight on. The men, disturbed by the sudden unity of women invite Madam Ebele, a top female member of their party and leader of the market women, for a peaceful negotiation. She arrives but insists that any presidential candidate other than professor Nona will not be supported by the women. She says:

**Ebele:** The national Association of market women have asked me to tell you that the only candidate they are ready to vote for is Nona Odaro (p.72)

The men offer her two million naira with a promise to add another five million naira later, yet Madam Ebele turns down the offer. The men are bent on dividing the women so that they lose focus.

At another meeting, the men announce that they have accepted to consider Nona for the position of Vice president, but the women still do not accept the offer. They insist that it is either Nona for president or nobody at all. The women go ahead to paste their candidate's posters all over the place. Finally, some men join professor Nona's campaign train. Voting takes place and Nona, the female presidential candidate, emerges as the winner with a very wide margin. In the words of Tse (2010:118), "this is a clear indication that no matter how long it takes, no matter how rough the road is, Nigerian women will one day have cause to smile and as such should not give up". The people voted for the right candidate, the candidate of their choice. This is the voice of conscience at work.

As a propagandist playwright, Salami-Agunloye's *More Than Dancing* seeks to elicit action. As rightly observed in the introduction to the play by Ekpe (2003), "it is intended to make women detest obscurity and walk into the limelight and power" (xiii). Salami has employed a good dramatic strategy by causing Nona to fall asleep any time she contemplates dumping the women's mandate. At such instances, past Nigerian heroines appear to her and dramatize what they passed through before they could save their societies. These legends are brought on board in the play to spur and encourage Nona, the icon of the Nigerian women, to pick up the challenge when she is conscientiously nominated by the women to pick a flag for the presidential election. Nona claims to be a novice in politics, coupled with her love for her home and her career, she almost opts out of the race. However, the memory of the vision about the Nigerian past female legends, who in the past distinguished themselves in their efforts to liberate their respective societies keeps her on.

The beatification of the Nigerian female legends in *More Than Dancing* is a patriotic act aimed at nudging Nigerian women to take a cue from and offer their services to the country. Nona is therefore, prompted by the magnificent actions of these past Nigerian heroines as moderated by Mama Nigeria. The contributions of these women to nation building is recorded in history and deployed in the play to encourage women to offer altruistic service to the nation.

The history records ways in which Inikpi gave her precious life to liberate the Igala people from the incursion of Benin forces. This emphasizes the self-sacrificing nature of some Nigerian women recorded in history. Queen Amina of Zazzau is yet another woman known to have contributed in the establishment of the Hausa Kingdom. In fact, she was so courageous in the warfront that she is said to have demonstrated strength equal to that of men if not more. Queen Idia of Benin also exhibited her prowess in battle over the Igala when they were almost overran by warriors of the Benin kingdom. Moremi, the spy, in the same vein, took risks by allowing herself to be captured so as to learn the tricks and secrets of the Igbo warriors and, by so doing, helped her people to conquer them. Queen Kambasa of Bonny also led battles conquering several kingdoms. Mama Tinubu of Lagos, is yet another woman who is said to have fought to have Oba Dosumu in Lagos enthroned by confronting the colonial masters. Emotan of Benin is said to have fought and brought peace and justice in Benin kingdom by bringing Oba Ewuare to the throne single-handedly. Other women whose exploits are recalled in the texts are Nwanyeruwa of Aba who stood firm and supported the Aba women's riot of 1929. Fumilayo Kuti of the then National Council for Nigeria and Cameroon (N.C.N.C) headed an advocacy group on the right of women to vote and be voted for in Abeokuta. And Gambo Sawaba of the Northern Elements People's Union (N.E.P.U), a vanguard of women's involvement in politics at the time when it was a taboo for women to participate in political activities especially in Northern Nigeria.

This play, according to Tse (2010:119), is a reflection of the political situation in Nigeria where patriarchy reigns supreme. In Nigeria, men control almost all the resources available. Women are also under the control of men. Nigerian men do not believe that women, too, have the potential to rule. Nigerian men feel that leadership, governance and politics are reserved for them while women are supposed to be restricted to the kitchen perpetually. Madu states this clearly in the play when he says:

**Madu:** Women have no right being in politics. They are our wives. Let them remain at home. That is their duty post (P.54).

In another instance, Madu and Sani clearly speak out men's mind in the following exchange:

**Madu:** You see, all women are good for is to dance at party rallies, not to rule! They have no place in politics. Not in African politics or the decision-making process! We will fight them with our last drop of blood.

**Sani:** When America produces female leader, then Nigeria will be ready to produce one. Until then, tell professor Nona Odaro to go home and cook for her husband, period! (P.30).

Long after Nigeria got its independence, such beliefs and views are still held or expressed by Nigerian men and they have used them as a basis to suppress and dominate women politically and otherwise. In the play as well as in the Nigerian society, as Tse (2010:119), rightly observes, the participation of women in politics is limited to dancing at party rallies to please men, as well as voting for them (insert quotation marks if this is directly taken from Tse). Women groups are usually hired with paltry sum of money to dance under the hot sun while men sit under the shadow of trees or canopies and watch them, after which a few bags of salt, yards of wrappers, packets of magi cubes are given to them to share in their multitude. All these are intended to distract women from thinking about their constitutional rights.

The truth, however, is that most Nigerian men are not prepared to allow women equal opportunity to participate in politics as they still feel that leadership is their exclusive right. Sani exemplifies this disposition in the play when he asks:



**Sani:** Who will give the presidential seat to a woman? In this country? *Wa la hi ta la hi*, the day a woman becomes the president of this country, I will cross over to Chad. A woman will not rule me, Allah forbid (p.38).

Tse further laments the exclusion of women from politics and decision-making process in Nigeria, an act which, in his own opinion, has caused the nation more harm than good. He further argues that the Nigerian men who have ruled the country in the past fifty years have not, in any way, bettered the lot of the ordinary Nigerians. To him, it is possible that if women were allowed to partake in the decision-making process, Nigeria would have, perhaps, been better today. Hakeem, one of the male characters in the play, expresses Tse's submissions in the following words:

**Hakeem:** The continued exclusion of women from the decision-making position in the nation will slow down the pace of development of the democratic process and stunt the economic growth of the nation (p.35).

It is worth noting, as rightly pointed out by Ebo (2009), that Hakeem is one of the progressive men that are highly placed in the party hierarchy. As a party stalwart, he understands the need for change, for the proper inclusion of women in decision making particularly in politics. Hekeem observes further that:

**Hakeem:** Democracy must include the opinions and perceptions of men as well as women. This is important because women constitute half of the nation's population (p.37).

This is a voice of conscience, a voice of change.

In *Sweet Revenge*, Salami-Agunloye explores how the collaborative efforts of both men and women can help foster national development. The play advocates for the involvement of women in mainstream socio-political affairs. Through this inclusion, women will be moved from the margin to the centre of society. The play has been able to knit two settings; London and Nigeria to create an effect. London, on one hand, represents the developed countries where democracy has thrived for decades and women have been fully absorbed into the scheme of things. Nigeria, on the other hand, exemplifies developing countries set back by military coups as well as marginalization of women. According to Ebo, the playwright "meticulously juxtaposes such burning issues like "nationalism against unpatriotism, fidelity against debauchery, democracy against meritocracy, gender equality against gender marginalization in her socio-political crusade" (Ebo, 2009:406).

Through Aisosa the playwright clearly embosses self-sacrifice, self-denial and patriotism as prized virtues needed for nation building. These virtues are juxtaposed with vices such as self-aggrandizement, deceit, cheating and looting of national treasury. In the beginning of the play, Sota's community asks him to return from London and serve his fatherland. With the restoration of democracy in Nigeria, his people acknowledge that he is the best candidate to represent them at the Senate. Sota is well aware that such call is an honour and an opportunity, not for self-enrichment, but for duty and selfless service. Sota reiterates this view when he says: **Sota:** My people call and no doubt, I must respond to it... I cannot turn down their offer, I must respond... I cannot fail my people. No, I will not turn down their invitation. They have reposed their confidence in me and I will not fail them. I cannot let them down. Together we shall transform our land (pp.1-2).

What Agunloye tries to establish in this play, according to Ebo (2009:407), is the practice of inter-mingling forces between family/parental responsibility and national leadership. This, indeed, is evident in the characters of Sota Ojo and Aisosa. While Aisosa struggles tirelessly, contributing her best towards raising a healthy family in Nigeria, Sota is in London enjoying himself with, among other things, an extra-marital affair with Cheryl, a British woman and an extension of his stay in London from four to eight years.

Saliently captured in the play is the fact that anyone who fails at the family level should not be entrusted with political position. By using Sota, the playwright demonstrates that any man that oppresses his family will equally oppress those for whom he is asked to represent. Again, the playwright shows the strength of women by empowering them with political might namely, their votes. Sota could not have won the election were it not for the women who exercised their electoral power by coming out in their numbers to vote for him just because of Aisosa, the great mother and wife, who despite her husband's eight long and silent years of absence, comported herself properly.

The text anchors its thematic thrust on politics of exclusion to evaluate the extent to which Nigerian women, in the context of developing country, are neglected and antagonized in the scheme of things. The two women – Aisosa and Cheryl – are metaphoric depiction of the state of womanhood in these nations. It is done to show that while developed countries like Britain, hold women highly by absorbing them into the mainstream politics and governance, the story remains a far cry in Africa. Therefore, Cheryl as a Briton frowns at the lukewarm attitude of Sota who feels reluctant in accepting women as team players in the game of politics. Disgusted at this type of attitude, Cheryl laments thus:

**Cheryl:** It seems your country is made up of only men; women are nowhere in your national agenda. They are at the margin, nowhere near the centre. Good luck to you all (p.11).

Unlike what is seen in the play, Nigerian women no more play a second fiddle as they are somewhat absorbed in the mainstream politics. Their integration in governance is necessitated by labour rather than favour. Their actions, though non-violent, yield positive results due to their insistent pleas for a better place in society. As a result of their struggle for better place, some women are killed and many others lost their homes. Regie captures this reality in the following comments:

**Regie:** Oh! Our dear mothers, they put in all they could. They held rallies, pleaded with the wives of military leaders, led protest marches; in fact, one woman who strongly opposed them was shot dead one early morning. She paid dearly with her life (P.9).

The play has shown that women are the true heroines of the present democracy. Hence, the men have no other option than to recognize and give them a proper place in the political arena. However, Sota fails to recognize this truth which is why she accepts Sota's misdeeds.

This is portrayed in the dialogue that ensues thus:

**Cheryl:** And what role will the women play in this now Nigeria?

**Sota:** Relax, don't be too hasty Cheryl. We have just commenced. All that will be worked out later. As soon as things are sorted out, they will be duly compensated.

**Cheryl:** Did I hear you say "compensated"?

**Sota:** Yes, what about that?

**Cheryl:** You talk as if they are not part of the system. They should be involved right from the start.

**Sota:** Well, things don't work that way in Africa. We take a lot of things into consideration.

**Regie:** That is why you are going there. Sota you are going there to join others to change things. Change attitudes, change values positively. You are going there for change Sota. (P. 10).

Right from the outset, Sota undermines the power of women and declines seeing women as partners in progress. He hardly appreciates efforts made by women, including his wife in improving his life and that of the society. He returns home after his unplanned eight years stay in London to insult and accuse Aisosa of so many offences. Although Aisosa has sacrificed so much in improving his lot in all aspects, he finally throws her into the street. He becomes more headstrong and refuses to recognize women as a force to reckon with. Immediately after his election, he begins his wicked scheming against them in spite of Nosa's warning:

The ideology of revolt or protest in Salami-Agunloye's play, in the words of Ebo (2009), is not against men per se but rather against obnoxious practices against women by men". Therefore, the playwright presents Regie as symbol of some Nigerian men who join forces with women to advocate for the empowerment of women in society. Regie reminds Sota of the ideals they fought for thus:

**Regie:** Sota, remember the ideals we fought for: dignity, unity and honour for all, a new Nigeria, where no one is oppressed (p. 13).

On the other hand, Sota represents a section of Nigerian men who, in spite of their education and exposure, do not believe in partnering with women to advance a better society. Such men do not appreciate women as colleagues but treat them as slaves or tools for sexual gratification. They do not even consider educated women competent enough to collaborate with in the bid to build a stronger and healthier nation. Consequent upon these, they, most times, discourage women from engaging in worthwhile and lucrative ventures for the fear that such women will climb the social ladder and undermine them. This, perhaps, explains why Sota persuades Aisosa to give up her job as a consultant gynaecologist in the hospital under the pretext that he wants her to have enough time to give their children the best attention. This experience is projected in the following exchange:

**Sota:** You should have been doing something to make up.

**Aisosa:** Like what Dr Sota Ojo? Do what? When you asked me to resign my job as a consultant gynaecologist so I could give your children the best care they needed, did you not realize the implication? (p.16).

Sota's motive is, indeed, to make Aisosa stop her work so as to remain financially dependent on him. As illustrated in the play, men like Sota often have broken homes largely because of greed and selfishness.

Senator Sota Ojo and his counterpart in the House of Representatives, Hon. Abel Nigie do not fulfill any of their promises to their people for the years they spend in office. Nigie's ineffectiveness is because of his protracted illness, while Sota's is due to his quest for self fulfillment. When female politicians send their delegates to the duo reminding them of their mandates, Hon. Nigie apologizes for his protracted ineffectiveness. Senator Sota, on the other hand, chooses to arrest the women "charging them with disturbance of peace and trespass of private property" (PP.47- 48). Double tragedy strikes when his British wife discovers he has a legally married wife in Nigeria. Cheryl, upon this discovery, becomes furious. She apologizes to Aisosa who now experiences glorious life as her long years of selfless services to humanity yields good results. Cheryl surrenders the 10 million pounds Sota looted back to the Nigerian government and runs back to her country. This is the height of Sota's tragedy.

### Conclusion

The Nigerian writers especially the female dramatists have shifted progressively in their creative adventure, from art-for-art-sake to drama of liberation, social mobilization and political conscientization. They have shifted from historical documentation to radical political activism. This is true of Tess Onweme and Irene Salami-Agunloye whose plays are geared towards achieving social change. These two dramatists believe that when the oppressed is sufficiently sensitized and conscientized, then inspiring and mobilizing them to action becomes achievable. This, to them, is the only way to forcefully bring about the desired change and transformation in society. In *The Reign of Wazobia*, Onweme challenges the practice of not allowing women to assume leadership position. *Then She Said It*, is a revolt against oppression and exploitation of a people. Irene Salami's *More Than Dancing*, seeks to elicit political action. It is intended to make women detest obscurity and walk into lime light and power. It is an attempt to rekindle the revolutionary spirit in Nigerian women to enable them to rise up to the challenges of our time. In *Sweet Revenge*, Salami-Agunloye explores how the collaborative efforts of both men and women can help foster national development. The play advocates for the involvement of women in the mainstream political affairs, thereby moving them from the margin to the centre of political activism.

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