

**PROTEST IN WOMEN-CENTRED LITERARY DRAMA:
Julie Okoh's *Edewede* and Irene Salami-Agunloye's *More Than Dancing* in Focus**

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Abstract

Nigerian literary drama from its inception to date has ever remained committed to the social realities of its time. From the days of the first generation dramatists to the present literary dramatic engagements, drama has remained relevant to the emerging trends of discourses in Nigeria. It has been deployed as a means of evaluating and possibly interrogating the socio-cultural and political realities in the country. The dramatists challenge and protest against all forms of social ills such as gender inequality, injustice, oppression, dehumanization, unemployment, and unhealthy cultural practices among others. Literary artists consciously reflect these frightening and undemocratic realities in their works, calling on the masses to rise up against their oppressors. Female writers are not left out in this subversive literary enterprise. This work therefore focuses on the dramatic expeditions of Irene Salami-Agunloye and Julie Okoh who have deployed drama as a means of protesting against the oppression, subjugation and marginalization of women in Nigeria. These issues are amplified in *More than Dancing* by Irene Salami-Agunloye and *Edewede* by Julie Okoh. The paper is premised on the Marxist and socialist feminist theories. These theories encourage the application of revolutionary forces as a means of seeking positive changes. The paper concludes that protest and revolt may not completely seize in Nigeria until injustice, inequality and indeed all oppressive structures in Nigeria are demolished.

Keywords: literary artists, oppression, subjugation, marginalization, democratic expedition.

Introduction

Drama is essentially meant to entertain, but the primary value of drama lies in its subversive potential as a veritable instrument of change. 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 P. 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.

Nigerian literary drama through generations has arguably remained committed to the social realities of its time. From the first to the present generation of dramatists, drama has been deployed as a means of interpreting, evaluating and possibly interrogating the realities and dreams of the society. Indeed, literary artistry in the vision of the artists through generations have engaged realities that have and still has direct bearing and impact on the lives of Nigerians. The artists have demonstrated concerns for the nation from the days of colonialism, through independence, military despotism into an inconsequential democratic system (Adeyemi Adegboyega, 2020 P.51). The first generation playwrights for instance, propagated the doctrine that upholds the supremacy of the gods. This generation of dramatists spearheaded by Wole Soyinka believe in the forces of fate and destiny. Wole Soyinka particularly is believed to be ardent traditionalist, a culturist that emphasize the heritage, potency of African culture and tradition in his dramaturgy (Ogunkiran, 2020 P.74). This group of dramatists were referred to as liberal conservative generation.

However, the contemporary post-colonial generations of dramatists go beyond art for art sake dramaturgy. They reckon on drama as a potent instrument of social mobilization. In other words, drama must be functional in terms of arousing the consciousness of the masses towards positive change in the society. Our focus in this paper however, is on protest in women-centred drama.

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Specifically, we shall be examining how Irene Salami-Agunloye and Julie Okoh have deployed drama as a means of arousing the consciousness of women towards their plight. This work is premised on the Marxist and socialist feminist theories since protest involves all categories of people who are dissatisfied with the services of the ruling class. Marxism is a social, political and economic philosophy named after Karl Marx. It examined the effect of capitalism on labour, productivity, and economic development and argues for a worker revolution to overturn capitalism in favour of communism. Marxism is both a social and economic theory, which encompasses Marxist class conflict theory and Marxian economics. Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) to proclaim the Marxist doctrine. The book declared the enslavement of the working class (proletariats) by the capitalists (bourgeoisies) through economic policies and the control of production of goods and urged the proletariats to rise in revolt and strip the capitalists of their economic and political powers.

During the 1970s, Marxist and socialist feminist theories blamed the economic structure and the material aspects of life as the main source of gender inequality. These theories argue that the source of women's oppression is the economic dependence on a husband and their exploitation as cheap labour in the capital workforce because they are seen primarily as wives and mothers (Lorber, 1998 P.16).

Protest 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 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 attainments 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,P.92). In the following section of this paper, we shall be focusing on the preoccupation of feminist writers in using their artistry to engage and respond to issues concerning women in Nigeria. We shall begin by examining the concept of women centred- drama.

Women-Centred Drama

In Nigeria, women-centred drama has been categorized into two. The first category deals with the creative products of male dramatists on women and issues that concern them, while the second category has to do with the creative outputs of female dramatists focused on women and women-centred matters. The first category constitutes the first generation Nigerian dramatists who are predominantly male dramatists. They include such dramatists as Wole Soyinka, J.P Clark, Ola Rotimi and Wale Ogunyemi. Zulu Sofola came on board a little later as the first female Nigerian dramatist. It is pertinent to note here that most of the plays of these pioneer dramatists are replete with titanic heroes. There is a celebration of the prowess, masculinity and glory of men in most of these texts. These heroes range from great astute war generals like Kurunmi, in *Kurunmi* and Odewale in *The Gods are not to Blame* by Ola Rotimi; Olunde in *Death and the King's Horsemen* by Wole Soyinka and Ozidi in *Ozidi* by J.P Clark (Jeremiah Methuselah, 2010 P.153). Methuselah (2010) further observes that women characters placed alongside these titanic heroes are simply flat, colourless and unimportant, projected within the traditional perspective. The women characters are also objectified as sex symbols, weak, inferior and peripheral beings. For example, in Wole Soyinka's works, women are objectified as sex symbols. This portrait is used in *Kongi's Harvest* where Segi is portrayed as a prostitute and Sidi is used as a sex symbol in *The Lion and the Jewel*. In *The Trials of Brother Jero*, Soyinka portrays Amope as a ceaseless nagging woman. J.P Clark's Ebiere in *Song of a Goat* entices her husband's younger brother into sexual relationship. In Ola Rotimi's *The God's are not to Blame*, Queen Ojuola ended up having incestuous relationship with her son Odewale.

The second category of women- centred drama includes such writers as Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, Stella Oyedepo Julie Okoh, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Tracie Chimah Utoh-Ezeajugh and many others. The works of most of these dramatists project positive image of women. They also portray men and men-centred issues negatively with uncomplimentary remarks. The female dramatists ensure that women play crucial roles in their texts. Above all, the female protagonists are made to revolt against unacceptable conditions within her society.

In their efforts to re-write texts written by men, female writers introduce into their plays female protagonists breaking the trend of male heroes like Kurumi, Kongi, Ozidi etc. which monopolized the Nigerian stage for a very long time. In most cases these heroines revolt against one form of oppression or another. The protest theatre has become popular in the Nigerian theatre as writers see it as a convenient avenue to express the struggle and aspirations of the oppressed masses in the society. (Irene Salami-Agunloye, 2011 p.35.)

Protest in Julie Okoh's *Edewede*

In *Edewede*, Julie Okoh privileges the female subject, empowering her to spearhead the eradication of the ancient tradition of female circumcision which she identifies as a tool of male oppression. Circumcision is a traditional practice in which a girl/woman cuts off parts or whole organs of the female genitalia usually using knife or a razor blade, which may be unsterilized. The cultural justification for this practice varies across Nigeria. It is considered 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 male sexual pleasure. Julie Okoh paints this picture in her play *Edewede*. The older women including Ebikere, Edewede's mother-in-law see nothing wrong with circumcision even though it has led to the death of many young girls, including her grand-daughter. Edewede 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.

Ebikere: You are misleading her with your blab-blab talk. No wonder she is afraid of circumcision. My grandchild, do not listen to her vile tongue. Circumcision is a thing of joy, prestige and cultural identity. (6)

Edewede: ...Circumcision has brought tears to my eyes many times.

Edewede: I know that circumcision is a destroyer. It has killed my daughter(8).

Aggrieved by her defiance of culture, Ebikere 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" (8).

Julie Okoh creates Edewede as the new woman, who challenges the age-long cultural practice, which hitherto many women have been silent about, despite their displeasure of the practice. She is determined to eradicate the practice even though she is faced with several challenges. Her husband warns her saying: "Wedee, severing a people from their culture is just like separating those children wrapped up in scuffle... You might be destroyed in the process" (25). Fully determined, Edewede responds, "what a noble death to die." (25) For Edewede, female circumcision is obsolete and must be abolished.

Edewede feels that most traditional institutions disempowered women and slowed down the pace of their total emancipation. She exclaims:

Enough of your oracle! Anytime anybody is sick; we kill fowls, we pour libation, we spray white chalk powder everywhere to chase away evil spirits, because that is what the oracle says. Yet everyday, our children die in great numbers. Each time, the oracle pushes the cause on human maliciousness. But Mama-nurse can explain the cause of the deaths in this village. And she can cure many diseases (11).

From the above lines it is clear that tradition is perpetuated to suppress women. Edewede has unveiled the ignorance of her people who are perpetually relying on divination and attributing the cause of many ailments to spiritual force. Undaunted by the prevailing circumstances, she goes ahead to fight for what she believes in.

Methuselah (2010 P.158) sees the practice of circumcision as an "imposition of a cultural practice that served more as a control measure on women." But Edewede does not spare words at all in condemning what she sees as barbaric practice that has no place in the 21st century. (Methuselah 2010 P. 158).

Edewede's association with Mama Nurse empowers her as she acquires knowledge. This education now liberates and strengthens her. With the help of the strong women characters in the play, and with persistence and commitment to their cause, the women are able to persuade the men to eradicate circumcision from the land.

Protest in Irene Salami Agunloye's *More Than Dancing*

Salami-Agunloye's play, *More Than Dancing* is about women's subtle agitation for political space. In the play, women challenge male hegemony by daring to vie for political positions that were hitherto a male exclusive preserve. This is the playwright's attempt to rekindle revolutionary consciousness of Nigerian women to rise up to the challenges of our 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 the party elders are 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 critically considers the decision of her fellow women and suddenly falls into a trance and the past Nigerian heroines appear to her and encourage her to lead the women. Suddenly 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 has caused some concern to men. 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 (Pp. 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, P.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".

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, "it is intended to make women detest obscurity and walk into the limelight and power" (Ekpe, 2003, P. xiv). 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 to withdraw from the race but for the remembrance of the vision about the past Nigerian female legends, who in the past distinguished themselves in order to liberate their respective societies. Nona, the central character, openly confesses her love for her country and her distaste for politics:

The mantle of leadership has fallen on me. As the women's candidate, I cannot fail them. I love politics but I am inexperienced in political intrigues. I hate the intrigues in politics. I am not a smooth talker. I'm not crafty in any way. How can I cope? This is going to put a lot of demand on me, on my family and on my career. I love my home. I love my career and I love my husband... In spite of all these I love my country (P.16) .

The beatification of the Nigerian female legends in *More Than Dancing* is a patriotic act for Nigerian women to take a cue for altruistic service to the country. Nona in the play is made to get her signal in vision through the magnificent ways of these past Nigerian heroines as moderated by Mama Nigeria.

The history about Inikpi is that she gave her precious life to liberate the Igala people from the Benin forces. This emphasizes the self sacrificing and desirous nature of the Nigerian women that has been on record. Queen Amina of Zazzau is also known to have established the Hausa Empire. In fact, she was so wonderful at warfare that she demonstrated strength equal to that of men, or even more.

Queen Idia of Benin also sustained her warfare prowess over the Igala when they were about running down the Benin kingdom. Moremi, the spy, in the same vein took a risk by allowing herself to be captured so as to learn the tricks and secrets of the Igbo warfare, and later stood victorious over them. Queen Kambasa of Bonny also led battles conquering other kingdoms around. Mama Tinubu of Lagos, according to history, is said to have fought to have Oba Dosumu in Lagos enthroned by confronting the colonial masters.

Emotan of Benin single-handedly fought and brought peace and justice in Benin kingdom by bringing Oba Ewuare to the throne. Nwanyeruwa of Aba stood firm and supported the Aba women's riot of 1929. Fumilayo Kuti in Abeokuta 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. And Gambo Sawaba of the Northern Elements People's Union (N.E.P.U) was also 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), is a reflection of the political situation in Nigeria, where patriarchy reigns supreme. In Nigeria, only men control 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. In the sixty one years of Nigerian independence, in as much as women constitute more than half of the entire population of the country, their participation in politics and governance has been inconsequential. Nigerian men feel that leadership, governance and politics are reserved for them while women are supposed to be perpetually restricted to the kitchen. 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 when they observe:

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).

Since independence, such beliefs and views have been held or expressed by Nigerian men and they have used them as a basis to suppress and dominate the women politically and otherwise. In the play as well as in the Nigerian society, as Tse (2010), rightly observes, the participation of women in politics is limited to dancing at party rallies to please men, as well as voting for them. 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. At the beginning of the play, during the United Peoples Liberation Party's conventions, Madam Bisi, the party women's leader is shown to be angry with this development and she stops the drumming and dancing:

Bisi: Stop the drumming! Stop dancing Stop immediately... Enough of the dancing! Enough is Enough!! ...

The men have since stopped dancing... United People Liberation party is a party for men.... Men are chairpersons, secretaries, vice chairpersons, treasurers, public relations officers, welfare officers, financial secretaries and so on. They are members of the board of trustees... The liberation is for only men, not for women. Yet, when it is time for election, women are mobilized to vote. We are only good for dancing and voting... Stop dancing... Go back home! You must realize that it is your fundamental human rights to participate in governanceWomen are equal partners with men in governance. (PP.1-2)

The truth, however, is that most Nigerian men are not prepared to allow women equal participation in politics as the men still feel that leadership is their exclusive right. Sani in the play speaks the minds of Nigerian men when he questions:

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(2010) 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. Indeed, Nigerian men who have ruled in the past sixty-one years have not in any way bettered the lot of the ordinary Nigerians. Perhaps, if women were allowed to partake in the decision-making process, Nigeria would have been better today. He further argues that the Nigerian men who have ruled the country in the process, perhaps Nigeria would have been better today. Hakeem, one of the male characters in the play, shares the same opinion with Tse Paul. He observes that:

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 worthy to note, as rightly pointed out by Ebo (2009), that Hakeem is one of the progressive men that are highly placed in the party hierarchy who understand this need for change, for the proper representation of women and their inclusion in the decision making process in politics. He (Hakeem) observes further:

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).

More Than Dancing, from the liberal feminist perspective, sees women as strong and active set of the human race and not passive objects of social change. In the play, Salami-Agunloye shows women as an important social group agitating to remove themselves from the socio-political, economic and cultural subjugation they face in a patriarchal society. She demonstrates in the play that socio-political and economic empowerment are requisite conditions for peaceful and equal co-existence of both genders in a male-dominated society. Nona agrees to this:

Nona: UPLP is for all of us, male and female, remove the women from it, the men will be stranded, remove the men and the women will be no more too... We cannot stand on our own, the same goes for the men. We need one another (P.7).

Conclusion

From the foregoing literary expedition, we have dissected the thematic preoccupation of two renowned Nigerian female dramatists, Julie Okoh and Irene Salami-Agunloye whose plays *More Than Dancing* and *Edewede* have been fully discussed. The analysis of the plays reveal that literary creativity in Nigeria especially in the contemporary times is largely political, driven by protest to foster positive change. The playwright also highlights the importance of change or transformation of existing socio-cultural and political traditions and beliefs with the vision of creating an equitable environment where women enjoy equal rights with men. The playwright presents women as recognizing the importance of cooperation towards the revolutionary changes which the women advocate for. Like Onwueme, Salami-Agunloye also advocates the adoption of the non violent approach of peaceful protest, dialogue and co-operation in finding solutions to the problems that bedevil the country.

In *Edewede*, Julie Okoh challenges the age long practice of female genital mutilation, a cultural practice which is considered as female rite of passage. In *More Than Dancing*, Irene showcases strong female character who ventures into the world of politics, an area that is known to be the sole preserve of men, and defeated their male rivals. Prof Nona Odaro in *More Than Dancing* displays the highest form of political astuteness and cunning that the men who had underestimated her were left dazed after her unexpected victory.

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