WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS AND FEMALE IMAGING IN NIGERIAN LITERARY DRAMA: AN OVERVIEW

Jeremiah S. S. Methuselah,
Department of English and Drama,
Kaduna State University, Kaduna.

Abstract

The author of this paper attempted an overview of the spectrum of images of women in Nigerian literary drama, right from the budding days of playwriting to the present. The study is basically a survey of literary plays by women. Content analysis of their works and the plays of the first generation of playwrights were made. The findings indicate that women have not been well represented in this early Nigerian drama, which was dominated by men. In many of these plays, women’s images have ranged from the flat, docile ordinary housewives, to the trope of temptresses, nags and other such representations that overlay them with such fractiousness and or complacency. Counter to these, female playwrights have also imaged women in strong, progressive and assertive heroic roles and also projected other issues that impact on the ordinary lives of women like domestic violence, insecurity, food security, poverty and disease and the effects of war on women and children.

Key words: female imaging, women playwrights, Nigerian literary drama

Introduction

Women have made great contributions in their various communities cutting across the gamut of the ethnic nationalities that populate what is presently known as Nigeria. Oral tradition and some recent historical documentation give credence to some of these great achievements both in the pristine past and even in contemporary society. There have been great women warriors like Queen Amina of Zazzau who ruled over a vast empire and vanquished the great part of Hausaland; Queen Kambasa of Bonny who at one occasion led an expedition to the town of Opuoko where she razed it to the ground; poets like Nana Asmau; social critics cum politicians like Funmilayo Ransome Kuti who was able to unseat the reigning Alake of Egbaland and Emotan of Benin who equally unseated the Oba who had usurped the throne from his brother; rich business women who were quite influential like Madam Tinubu who at a time determined who should be the Oba of Lagos; mythic heroines like Inikpi of the Igala and Moremi of Ife. These and many other women have made a tremendous impact on their various nationalities.

However, a careful study of literary drama in Nigeria will indicate a mixed grill of imaging of women. On one hand one is presented with pictures of women ranging from witches, prostitutes, nags, temptresses, militants, heroines, ordinary housewives etc. There are also those who are fearful, effeminate and docile-easily reduced to tears and emasculated. Most, if not
all these images come from male authored works. The interface chronicles a complete opposite to this lot. Here women are signified as militant, intrepid and audacious. In some cases, these women have been imaged as cold, calculating and vicious.

The objective of this paper is to chronicle the multiplicities of these images. We shall try to capture this by investigating factors that have influenced these significations of women from the nascent days of playwriting to the present by analysing some playwriting works of some women. We shall also outline other thematic preoccupations of these women playwrights. We have delineated the work into three phases of Early, Later and Contemporary periods.

The Background
Nigerian literary drama which began a few years before independence was mainly dominated by male writers. This period was characterized by a lot of nationalistic fervour. Many young Nigerians who had travelled abroad to further their education had started streaming back into the country. A lot of intellectual energy was invested in the projection of the effects of colonialism on the multi faceted nationalities that populated Nigeria. The clash of culture theme which permeated many literary works at this time was exemplified by the plays of James Ene Henshaw, the first playwright and a medical doctor. Henshaw wrote his *This is our Chance* series, a set of three plays, in 1958. The same year that Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* and a little while later Wole Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel*. All these works showcase the cultural tensions that attended a postcolonial state like Nigeria.

Henshaw’s first play *This is our Chance* discusses the ever recurring problem of inter tribal wars, dictatorship and the general hostility between the various fragmented communities which generally slowed down development in Africa. The second and third plays are *Jewels of the Shrine* and *A Man of Character* which all discuss family issues like the care for parents and the price of honesty. The images of women in these plays vary from the strong assertive characters like Kudaro who fought to marry Prince Ndamu, the love of her life in spite of the bitter enmity between their two villages. There is also her mother Queen Ansa who was the voice of reason, persuading an otherwise war hungry chief who wanted to attack the village of Udura where his daughter ran to.

In *Jewels of the Shrine*, women are presented as been more compassionate but in *A man of Character*, the temptress trope is highlighted. Kobina, a gentleman and hard working public servant is almost tempted to dip his hands into government funds because his wife who has been instigated by her sister to complain of lack of providence towards the family just because he has refused to compromise his principles by stealing public funds. The play ends on a positive note where husband and wife reconcile and the wife displays sorrow for her behaviour.

On the whole we can conclude that James Ene Henshaw’s image of women can loosely be said to be balanced given the array of heroines he showcased in these three plays which are representative of the varying shades and colours of human temperaments.
Generally speaking, this early period of playwriting was dominated by Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark and Ola Rotimi. Zulu Sofola came on board a little later. It is important to note that most of the plays of these three pioneers 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 Horseman* by Wole Soyinka, Ozidi in *Ozidi* by John Pepper Clark.

However, women characters that are placed alongside these titanic heroes are, if anything, flat, colourless and unimportant, projected within the traditional perspective. These playwrights also objectified women as “weak, choiceless, defeminized, invisible or incestuous” (Tobrise. 1999: 1). Sometimes they are merely mentioned in passing. Mosadiwin the wife of Kurunmi in *Kurunmi* exemplifies this attitude. Sadiku in *The Lion and the Jewel* Rola in *A Dance of the Forests*, Iyaloja and Bride in *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Amope in *The Trial of Bro Jero* all by Wole Soyinka do not play any heroic or progressive roles but are in most cases objectified as anti heroes, temptresses to the heroes or just plain wives at the beck and call of their husbands. The Woman Penitent in the same play is portrayed as a desperate nervous woman. Every day, she goes through the paroxysms of despair and despondence as she bewails her inability to conceive a child. She shouts and convulses the most during the session of prayer fervently praying that her barrenness and its attendant stigma will be taken away so that she can be a ‘normal’ member of the society. In Clark’s *Song of a Goat*, Ebiere, suffers the same fate so much so that in her desperation to remove this stigma she had sexual relations with Tonye, her husband’s younger brother.

In Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not To Blame*, Queen Ojuola also ended up having an incestuous relationship with her son Odewale. In his celebrated comedy, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* we are presented with another scenario of women at the beck and call of men. Beneath the facade of hilarity and comedy of the play which makes one to guffaw; beneath the wisecracks and scintillating language used by the playwright lies a fractious and acrimonious atmosphere among the three women who were all jostling for the attention of their husband.

This masculinist orientation of Rotimi is reflected even in the proverbs that he uses in many of his works. A re-reading of many of his plays shows how a lot of these proverbs are male oriented. (Evwierhoma, 2000: 93-95) These works celebrate male prowess, wisdom, intelligence, wit, tact and boldness. The few that talk about women are dismally negative and derogatory. They project negativity, retrogression and weakness – characteristics attributed to women alone. These negative stereotypes of women have continued to permeate a greater number of Nigerian plays authored by male writers.

There is therefore a tacit homology between these works of the pioneer playwrights and the societal outlook on women. This is so because historically women have always been constructed as weak and inferior to men. They were socialized to be homemakers and agriculturists. (Ityavyar and Obiajunwa, 1992:3)
Emecheta (1988:179) further paints a picture of how women are conditioned to accept this arrangement.

From childhood, she is conditioned into thinking that being the girl, she must do all the work, she must help her mother cook, clean, fetch water and look after her younger brothers and sisters.

Boys, on the other hand are socialized into accepting their roles as the defenders of the community. They must learn to withstand pain. While the girls stay at home and help out with the household chores, the boys follow the men to the bush to carry out more ‘important’ duties. They are socialized into seeing themselves beyond the boundaries of the home where they exhibit their prowess by adventuring into the world of wars, hunting, wrestling etc. And so the contributions of women in many pre-colonial communities is not only minimized but undervalued because of the “arbitrary demarcation between the so called ‘economic’ and ‘non-economic’ work which bears no relation to the actual physical output” (Ngcobo, 1988:144)

The advent of colonialism did not improve the lot of the women. If anything it further demoted her through the imposition of colonial institutions that “significantly compromised” her position. (Kumah, http://www.icaap.org/iiucode?101.2.1.15)

This traditional picture of women is therefore replicated wholesale by these playwrights without problematizing it. (Palmer, 1983:38) Theirs was merely a traditional sociological re-enactment of the ‘beautiful’ African culture. (Gugelberger, 1985:iv)

**Women Playwrights and Female Imaging in Early Nigerian Literary Drama**

Zulu Sofola, the first woman playwright came on board at the time most of the great Nigerian playwrights were making their mark. She made her debut with her first play, *The Disturbed Peace of Christmas* in 1971.

It should be noted, however that the entrance of Zulu Sofola into this intellectual ferment did not alter the image of women any bit in literary drama. If anything, it reaffirmed the supremacy of men over women. The same imagings immanent in plays of this generation which are male dominated find expression in her drama, too.

Running through the gamut of her plays is the perpetual conflict of the old and the new culture but ideologically the old always triumphs. She demonstrates an overwhelming fascination for the sacredness of tradition and never hesitates to hack down any of her characters who dare to pitch themselves against it. Her message is quite clear. She does not vacillate, nor does she pretend about it. The sacredness of tradition must be maintained and upheld at all cost in spite of its static and unprogressive nature. Therefore, in many of her plays, any attempt made by women to break free from this stranglehold only met with a vicious backlash.

In *Wedlock of the gods*, Ogwoma is punished for failing to respect the tradition of observing the mandatory period of mourning of her dead husband in spite of the clear evidence that it was a loveless marriage contracted by force. In *Old Wines Are Tasty*, the message suggests that one
cannot merely turn their back on tradition no matter how enlightened they may have become.

In *The Sweet Trap* male supremacy over the female occupies centre stage. This situation gains cognizance in form of, once again, an attempt by the character Clara who attempted to go against an age old injunction that the word of the husband is law. Right or wrong, it has to be accepted so. Clara had earlier indicated an intention to celebrate her birthday. Her husband Femi Sotubi disagrees and told his wife so. She is, however, convinced by a friend to hold the party elsewhere with the resultant embarrassment and near tragedy. In a symbolic move to show the supremacy of the man, Clara is made to kneel before her husband to ask for forgiveness. Her point of view is no consequence. Once again tradition has won. Most of Sofola’s other works toe the same line. In *The Wizard of Law*, the Temptress trope manifests with Sikira pressurizing her husband to indulge in skullduggery to satisfy her whims and caprices.

**Women Playwrights and Female Imaging in Later Nigerian Literary Drama**

The word ‘Later’ is used to indicate the period after the Nigerian civil war when the country was wracked by more than three years of bloodletting with the attendant colossal loss of lives and property. The rehabilitation of the country was made possible by the oil boom. This discovery of oil had supplanted most of the other crops that hitherto were exported abroad. There was a lot of money, but dishonesty reared its head in high places. Consequently Nigeria became a cesspit of corruption and squandermania. The rich were becoming richer and the poor were becoming poorer. This created a class consciousness in the society.

In the realm of the Arts, a new breed of playwrights arose to challenge this exploitation of the masses of the people by the ruling elite. This new breed of writers and indeed some of the old school broke away from the old order of playwriting which was “static and bizarre...peopled with desperado protagonists, helpless victims of fate who cannot deliver themselves” (Gbilekkaa, 1997:1).

The female playwright that dominated this period is Tess Onwueme. The world of Onwueme’s plays is populated by more women characters. Her womanist ideology is quite evident in many of the characters of her fictional world. She creates vivid pictures of the women and deliberately re-invents their status. Her works and indeed some later female plays can be said to be subversive in the sense that she does not subscribe to the existing situation where women are objectified in negative light. Subversive literature is that which “consciously or unconsciously undermines the received idea that men are superior to women and men should dominate women” (Breen, 1990: x)

Through the works of Onwueme and later female playwrights, we gain insights into the thematic preoccupation of women writers. Basically most of these writings are a reaction of what women consider to be a skewed representation of themselves in male authored works. Most plays by women are therefore “concerned with reversing the process of denigration, disfigurement, self contempt and erasure” (Morgan, 2006:98). Other issues immanent in female authored works include the following:
• Deliberately subverts male hegemony by reversing roles in their plays. In this case, women, who hitherto, occupied menial, unimportant roles, are ensconced in big time titanic roles while men peep from the rear.
• Projects certain cultural practices that are anti women and condemning same while at the same time calling for their abolition.
• Criticizes patriarchy and male egotism which socially constructs women as inferior to men.
• Agitate for social justice.
• Project women as being of equal intelligence and disposition with men.
• Celebrates culture and agitates for its preservation in its fixed putative state.
• Social enlightenment.

Most of these themes run through the gamut of many women’s works. But the role of the woman in all these is central because most of the stories are woven around them.

Having said that, the women in Onwueme’s plays are strong, assertive and empowered. Gladys in *A Hen too Soon*, Ona in *The Broken Calabash*, Wazobia in *The Reign of Wazobia*, Rufina in *The Artist’s Homecoming*, the women of Idu in *Tell it to Women* all celebrate the multiplicities of human emotions, vicissitudes and triumphs with all these female representations in the centre of it all. These all refused to be content with the role carved out by society for them. They fought their way through a maze of obstacles and proved their mettle. At a time when there was a conspicuous absence of any female voice for women within the Nigerian playwriting circle, the plays of Onwueme served to showcase the courage and fortitude of women.

However, it is pertinent to note that one of the major male playwrights to emerge at this time was Femi Osofisan. Osofisan broke away from the traditional sociological signification of women as presented by the older school. He refuses to replicate tradition but rather chooses to refine, modify and reconstruct it to suit his purposes. Osofisan does not portray man as a mere pawn in the hands of capricious and whimsical gods. Neither does he project a helpless and hopeless situation that cannot be remedied. He argues that he does that because he,

> Turns official historiography…and mythopoeisy and offer a dialectical counter narrative in which history is seen from the perspective of those who are society’s victims (Osofisan, 2000:135)

Many of his plays project this paradigmatic shift from the dominant ethos. In *The Chattering and the Song* Yajin and Funlola are instrumental to the social transformation in their society. In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Alhaja leads the robbers in the quest for change and re-ordering of the society. In *Red is the Freedom Road*, Ibidun, the wife of Akanji was able to galvanize the husband to lead the people into a rebellion against the tyranny of the king. Similarly, Ayoka in *Yungba Yungba and the Dance Contest* rallies round other girls to overthrow the sit tight Iyeneri who typifies the enduring
despotic and tyrannical rule of many African leaders. Even the peasant women in Osofisan’s plays exhibit a high level of consciousness. They understand the dynamics of exploitation but they are not deterred. They protest in unison. Elsewhere, they come together to build their society. The market women in *Once Upon Four Robbers, Fires Burn and Die Hard* and *Morountodun* all signify the positive role that women play in society.

Bode Sowande and other later dramatists also revolutionized the roles of women in their plays. Jolomi in *Farewell to Babylon* is one good example to cite. Even Rotimi’s later work like *Hopes of the Living Dead* had a better female characterization where we see Martha playing a pivotal role in the leprosy colony.

Even though Osofisan positively objectify women in his works, women argue that they are better placed to project the proclivities of women. (Showalter, 195) hence this new dynamic image of “power and radicalism” in Onwueme’s plays (Tobrise, 1999:1).

**Women Playwrights and Female Imaging in Contemporary Nigerian Literary Drama**

The solid foundation laid by Onwueme is improved upon by the women we have delineated in this phase. In terms of periodization, this phase can suggestively be said to have started in the middle 1980’s spanning down to the present period. This was a period when the Nigerian economy was already suffering a backlash of the corruption in high places as a result of the oil boom and political acrobatics. Even though women still wrote on issues of women emancipation, they tackled other contemporary issues that are economic, social and political. And so we witness a gradual shift from the emphasis on feminist ideology to more Universalist themes, even though with an underlining veneer of feminism. We also note, too, that some plays in this period by women highlight traditional and cultural practices that are oppressive to women.

Prolific women playwrights like Stella Oyedepo made her entrance first, some may even argue, about the same time as Tess Onwueme. However, it can be argued that the craft of Oyedepo’s playwriting actually blossomed in the middle Eighties. The earlier play which she wrote titled *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-chested* was so radically and Eurocentrically feminist that in her later works she distanced herself from that testy and rancorous stance choosing to adopt the more amenable and accommodationist womanist approach to project the women issue. Other playwrights in this period include Julie Okoh, Irene Salami and Tracie Chimah Utuh-Ezejugh.

All these women put in place a sustained and clearly defined methodology and ideology of projecting the yearnings and aspirations of the Nigerian woman. Like Onwueme, all their works anchor on women. The theme of infidelity, betrayal and cultural suppression of women permeates their plays with women suffering the brunt of male oppression and suppression. But unlike in Sofola’s plays where women easily get cowed and disciplined, the characters in the plays of these contemporary women playwrights are empowered to fight back. Though not in all occasions, by and large they succeed in portraying women as the injured party in a society that gives them little space to develop themselves.
We are presented with a highly militant picture of women in Oyedepo’s *The Rebellion of the Bumpy chested* who are willing to use even guns to fight for their rights because they have been ‘emancipated’. In the same vein Tracie Chimah Utos’s *Our Wife’s Have Gone Mad Again* displays women in this form of militancy. She reverses the roles in the home where the husband, Inyang, is more of a house boy than the master of the home. His wife on the other hand is imbued with a larger than life personality. She is economically empowered and uses this to bully him. Utos suggests that at the centre of women oppression is economic disempowerment and so she uses this to make her point suggesting that economic empowerment can break the stranglehold that men have over women.

Next we are given another picture of women who have been constricted and hemlined by society. Oyedepo’s *On His Demise* is a plaintive cry on the plight of women within the Nigerian socio-cultural milieu. It interrogates the sociological arrangement which places the women at a serious disadvantage vis-a –vis her relationship with her in- laws in the event of the death of her spouse. Fola was traumatized physically and emotionally by her in-laws. All manner of primitive cultural practices were brought to bear on her which further served as a point of estrangement to the family leading to her being driven off her property.

Okoh, takes on another daunting task of discussing female genital mutilation in *Edewede* a brilliant play that captures yet a traumatizing experience of women and the imposition of a cultural practice that served more as a control measure on women. In this play and *In The Fulness of Time* also written by her she does not spare words at all in condemning what she indicates as a barbaric practice that has no place in the 21st century. She uses the strong women characters in the play to fight this archaic system and so in a village where women are known to be docile, Edewede succeeded in rousing their consciousness to fight this practice. They succeeded in dismantling the practice by going on strike completely reminiscent to what the women in J P Clark’s *The Wife’s Revolt* did. In *Aisha*, she subverts another cultural practice that continues to divide people along tribal lines. She forcefully demolishes the resistance to the cross cultural marital union between Aisha, a northerner and Ehimare of Edo origin by using aspects of the Edo culture in ‘legitimizing’ their union. Contextually, of course, the message is for Nigerians to learn to integrate.

Irene Salami’s *More than Dancing* and Chimah Utos’s *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again* showcases strong women characters who venture 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. In the case of Irene and her friends in *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again* she used the most unconventional methods to secure the presidential ticket. Once again is Chimah Utos is making a point on behalf of women which seems to suggest that what a man can do a woman can equally achieve.

Probably, the greatest number of plays of this period highlights what we have tagged the prey and predator motif. This is a situation which underpins the woman’s situation against the backdrop of an insensitive,
unfaithful and uncaring spouse. The husband is brutish, callous and always breathing down the neck of the wife who is presented as faithful, loving and mild. He does with what he wants and cares a little for her feelings.

Most of these writers have written at least a play on this subject and have presented women thus. Chimah Utoh’s Every Day is for the Thief in which Chudi deceives Amaka and Oby and exploits them to the maximum until the day they found out, Nneora: The African Doll’s House where Nneora sacrifices all for her husband, Ikenne only to be greatly disappointed, scorned and rejected by him. In Closed Doors by Okoh, we are faced with the psychological state of exploited and abandoned young women suffering the brunt of male insensitivity and societal rejection.

Salami’s Sweet Revenge depart from this standpoint as she revolutionizes Aisossa her heroine who deals with Sora the husband when he abandons her. Like Aissatou in Ba’s So Long a Letter, she refuses to be weighed down by this disappointment but rather uses it to forge ahead in life by going to school and excelling to the chagrin of the husband. Even though this situation finds expression in her other plays The Queen Sisters (Ubi and Ewere) a play which chronicles the frustration of women in a typical polygamous situation. In this particular circumstance, the king’s Iloi pine and whine for the attention of the husband that is not there, daily feeding on the frustration of each other to the extent they started poisoning each other.

Julie Okoh’s The Mannequins, The Mask and The Trials where Dialey and Okosun deal terribly with their wives. These men neglect their homes emotionally, physically and economically. The wives are left cold and frustrated. They however, continue to be unflinchingly faithful to these men. However, the trend is brought to the fore most forcefully in In The Fulness of Time. In this play, the psychological conditioning and pathological denigration of women is highlighted. Dialey locks up his wife at home and systematically batters her physically and psychologically, driving her to a point of madness.

There are also the heroic characters that populate some other aspect of the female authored plays. There is Emotan in Emotan: A Benin Heroine. This woman possessed strength of character that was legendary especially looking at the background of society she came from. She was able to depose the reigning Oba whom everybody considered a usurper but could not do anything about. It took the effort of Emotan, a plain nondescript woman, to achieve this feat where the great warriors lacked the courage to try. The same suggestion is made by Oyedepo of the power of women when she argues in Brain Has No Gender that women are as much intelligent as men probably as a reply to Soyinka’s assertion as such in The Lion and the Jewel where women are projected as simpletons. Osomo, a girl from a poor background having struggled through school is able to excel and collect all the prices in her graduation year. Earlier on her parents wanted to marry her off to an eighty year old man because she was just a girl. She ran away on the first night of her wedding.

On a general note, most of these women playwrights have made forays on certain topical contemporary issues. In Then She Said It, Onwueme comments on the Niger Delta crisis and the attendant corruption
through the collusion of multinational companies and their local collaborators who are used to commit economic crimes against the nation.

Oyedepo captures this in a slightly different way in her play See where the people wracked by all of problems call on their creator to come and see. Using the deus ex machina, we are treated to a panorama of social ills bedeviling the society from poverty, hunger, greed, injustice, unemployment, materialism and other such vices. The creator through his Messenger berate the people for being responsible for their woes seeing that they had failed to observe the simple rule of collective action but rather chose to operate like animals. She further expounds on this in Worshippers of the Naira where the love of money leads to betrayal, fantasy and unscrupulousness which in her Doom in the Dimes leads to destruction given the extent that people are willing to go to secure it. Owo-eje who sells his soul to the devil for this material wealth typifies many such Nigerians who daily get trapped by its allure.

In Alice Oh! Alice, Oyedepo grapples with the enduring theme of child abuse and exploitation, an issue that has assumed alarming proportions within the present dispensation so much that government had to set up an agency to combat it. Alice is used as a house girl and a sex slave with Madam Rokeke collecting the proceeds from customers who come to brutalize the twelve year old girl.

Chimah Utoh on the other hand discusses the pandemic nature of HIV/AIDS in the Cauldron of Death. The rippling effect of this scourge engulfs the family of Ikem as it passes on from father other members of the family through one careless sexual indiscretion- an attitude very much prevalent in the Nigerian society.

The ivory tower of education comes under the probing satellite of Oko’s pen in Who can Fight the gods. She exposes the moral decay and general and infrastructural collapse of a once thriving system that compared with other nations the world over. Dr Lecturer who symbolizes the only voice of reason is condemned and vilified, his ideas branded as impractical and utopian.

**Conclusion**

The corpus of female drama has arisen to challenge the dominant ethos of women’s images in male authored works. Over the years the lot of women has been presented through the eyes of women who have shouted with stentorian voices of this misrepresentation. However, in writing these plays and also in their attempt at subverting patriarchy, women playwrights have by acts of omission or commission committed the same ‘crime that they accuse the male playwrights of.

They have tended to project women as the prey and the men as the predators. In many of these female plays, male characters are imaged as some kind of grotesque monsters with vampire instincts waiting to pounce on poor, helpless women. It should be noted that realistically, there are good women, but there are bad women too. Just as there are bad men in real life, there are good ones, too. Therefore the projection of all men as bad and all women as good in female drama renders most of it unrealistic, patronizing and bereft of sound judgement.
Furthermore, most of these female playwrights engage in name calling using hate language which obfuscates the real issues at stake. The end result of this bitterness gives these writings colourations of a gender war. This is in spite of the fact that many of these women writers subscribe to the womanist ideology.

In the light of the above, it is important to note that both male and female playwrights are cultural producers as much as commentators on the happenings in society. A less fractious attitude between the two parties can go a long way in helping the nation. This is because if male and female playwrights unite, they can help to educate the masses of the people who have been sidelined by big time money politics, squander mania and downright insensitivity of high government officials. With special emphasis on Theatre for Development paradigm, the Nigerian playwrights can go a long way in rousing the masses of the people from this state of inertia.

Women playwrights must return to the basics and do a proper homework. What do they want to do for the Nigerian woman? Is it to try to import foreign, combative ideologies or to properly mirror the lot of downtrodden woman, who as a girl is forced to marry at an early age or as a woman is forced to participate in some terrible traditional rituals that are debasing, demeaning as much as debilitating to her health? A proper understanding of these ideological dynamics will go a long way in ensuring a better appreciation of the woman question in Nigeria. An effective way of impacting on the lives of poor ordinary women on the street is by the use of this powerful theatre for development paradigm. By its simple *modus operandi* it is highly effective in transmitting messages where the code of print fails. Ngugi wa Thiong'o achieved this feat in Kenya. It can also happen here.

It is therefore not enough to write plays that celebrate women in big time roles. While that is good, it is not enough because it falls short of the target and objective that these women playwrights have cut out for themselves. Using the guerrilla theatre approach, a lot can be achieved in rousing the consciousness of not just women but the generality of Nigerians who have become ‘windmills’ of politicians to be exploited at will.

This cannot, however, happen except women, learn to pull themselves out of the circle of inferiority which propels them rather than appreciating the totality of humanity in the drama of life are bent on only shoring up one sex being superior over the other, or that women are underdogs. Breen puts it aptly thus:

> Only when women have remade their own view of themselves and internalized a new scale of values will they be free of that masculine super ego which through socio-cultural training, they have more or less imposed on themselves. (Breen, 1990: 4)

A deliberate policy must be put in place by government at all levels to re-educate people of the importance of all people irrespective of their sex. The skewed images of women have given the wrong picture their abilities or disabilities. Doing that has tended to sideline them from the scheme of
things given that, whether in employment or any field of endeavour, they seem to be discriminated upon.

The girl child education should be canvassed with more aggressiveness by government at all levels. We see this as the starting point of a positive signification of women when they are taught from childhood to appreciate the attitude of self reliance and to be encouraged to better their lot. They will not end up becoming liabilities to their families in future. This is what opens them up for exploitation and “minimalization” as they end up as ‘parasites’ and ‘siddon look’ wives, girl friends etc.

References


_____ . (1977) *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. Oxford University Press.


