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Gender and Topicality in Onwueme's Plays

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Nyager, E.A. - Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Jos, Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria
E-mail: nestherta@yahoo.com

Abstract

Gender discourse as an offshoot of feminism has become an important factor in the global discourse on development. As a feminist, Tess Onwueme has often high-lighted her discussion of topical, national and global issues against the metaphorical backdrop of women exploited and disfranchised but identifiable with the nation/state. This paper seeks to illustrate the discussions of gender and topical/national issues through a focused examination of one or two of Onwueme's plays, namely: What Mama Said and No Vacancy. This will by no means limit our referencing to any other of her works. By this examination we also seek to present the playwright as a committed sensitive and creative artist who speaks for and seeks to lend voice to the voiceless.

Introduction

Gender is central to the way any society is organized; therefore gender is a social institution. Gender affects the roles men and women play in a society therefore gender is more than the differences between men and women. An early definition of gender was geared towards distinguishing social and biological aspects of the differences between women and men. Whereas "sex" refers to the biological aspects of women and men, "gender" refers to those aspects that are shaped by social forces or to the meaning that a society gives to biological differences (Riley, 1997:4)

Our first concern in this paper is to highlight the construction of gender vis a vis the roles the Nigerian society has ascribed to women and how women are breaking out of those stereotypical roles by the exigencies of 20th / 21st century Nigerian social reality. This, one figures, is one of the preoccupations of Onwueme's plays *What Mama said* and *No Vacancy*.

A second concern is to underscore the sensitivity of the playwright to topical issues of both national and global hue and colour and draw conclusions on her perspective and offering for a better future for citizens of the world, including Nigeria.

That women and the roles they play in our (Nigerian) society are of great concern to Onwueme is obvious in her treatment of female characters in her plays. Women are the protagonists in her plays. They are presented as smart among other things and champions of causes. This by itself is topical. For as observed in our abstract, gender (which cannot be discussed without some focus on women) has become an important component of the discourse of development. Although gender discourse is about both women and men (women and men and the roles assigned to them by society), women have always occupied the less privileged position in any society. It would therefore seem as if gender discourse is all about women. This injustice must be corrected for the overall benefit of society. Perhaps this has informed Onwueme's deliberate choice of vocal, articulate, and heroic females to populate her plays.

In *What Mama Said* she does this through the characters of Oshimi, Cross River and Imo, as well as Omi and Hadeja. These are women who have outgrown the confines of the domestic sphere and have moved into the public arena, to tackle the forces of repression, exploitation and disempowerment. This in itself is a reversal of roles. For women's place, as it has even been raised in the play is supposed to be in the domestic arena of the kitchen!

But how has gender been constructed in the Nigerian society as presented in the play?

From the very opening scene of the prologue, we see a turn around and an emerging new spirit – a militant spirit in the women when the wounded and chased about 're-emerge' on stage "angry; defiant and determined to be no longer crippled with fear or silence". (Onwueme; 2003:21) Women have customarily been expected to be silent listeners rather than vocal offerers of their opinion. They are expected to be domestically (pre-) occupied and to

have nothing to do with public life especially where men are concerned. Through-out the play, we encounter stereotypical notions expressed about women with intent to deride or intimidate. For instance on P. 51 women are equated to trouble-making. Ikpoba/Fuel Attendant says:

Women Trouble... trouble.....

The way this speech is written implies that women are endless trouble. Again on P. 58 Bonny/Police Officer Two says:

...Ha! Ha! Go home, women. The men and children are waiting.

This implies that women's gender role is care-giving, not public service.

On page 98, you get the impression that women are to be used and discarded. This speaks of the exploitation of women. Just like the land is being used and discarded by Shell, Oceana describes the women he has gone through and discarded. It is instructive that this speech is coming from Oceana, the representative of Shell which is 'assaulting' and vandalizing the land through its oil exploration and exploitation activities. Says he (referring of course to women)

... I've had it with them. Whatever you do as a man, you cannot please them. Strange. Strange. Women! And this breed here? Even stranger. (Onwueme 2003:98)

So then women are here cast as gratifiers of men's appetites; mere articles to be used and discarded. We see this illustrated further in Pipe-Lines penchant for offering his nieces; Imo and later Hadeja to the expatriate money-bags in exchange for luxury jeeps! In the context of this notion, how can any one in such a society expect women to take centre-stage in a revolutionary fight against societal ills. In this play and *No Vacancy*, we see women rise above these stereotypical notions to raise their voices against exploitation, repression and other societal ills as will be looked at, later in this write up.

On p.112 (Onwueme 2003) jobs are being discussed, specifically the job of a security guard.

Man: They want a guard, not a nurse.

Another man: They want a guard... a security guard.

Man: And that's a man's job.

Woman: Guard? Who says a woman can't do that job?

Women: Who says? Who says? Just try us! Dare us.

Women: What a man can do?

Woman: A woman can do also.

Woman: Better!

Women: Better! Better! Better! Women are better! (Chanting and dancing) Women are better! Better! Better! Women are better!

Men: (shoving them aside) You women give us a chance and go away.

Man: Or better, go find your place in the kitchen. (The men laugh).

The argument is clear. Women are assigned roles like nursing and are expected to be in the kitchen!

Later;

Man: You women of nowadays with your long tails.

Another man: Only that? Long beaks!

Man: To suck blood! Woman sabi make plenty-plenty blood.

Women: (protesting) And you eat them?

Man: Blood or women?

Another man: Both. What's the difference? Woman is blood. Ha! Ha! Ha!

Notice the level of laughter and deriding jokes that attend the discussion of women in the play. Are women then not perceived as a joke? As a laughing stock? As unserious? As of no consequence? Onwueme in the two plays under consideration, (*What mama said* and *No Vancancy*) attempts to reconstruct another image of women. She presents women as capable leaders, mobilizers, courageous, bold and vocal.

It is curious that throughout the play, Onwueme also uses the imagery of women to represent the land. At the local level the land is the Niger-delta area where the exploitation of oil has brought much damage to the environment. From a global perspective, the land is the nation of Nigeria that is being assaulted by international global market and political economics. A

few references to the text *What mama said* will illustrate this. On page 140 when Cross River asks,

Cross River: In the end tell us women, what are we going to do? (Chanting) what are we going to do...?

Hadeja: When our land is burnt and bonded

Imo: Why should you...

Hadeja: Why should you stand still, your voices choking when you are the oil and the river?

Imo: When you are the heart and breast of the land?

It is instructive to note that the female characters in the play all except Omi (which actually is Imo reversed) and Oshimi bear names that are names of Nigerian rivers. We have River Hadeja in the Northern part of the country. Imo and Cross-River are found in the eastern and South-South parts of the country respectively. The clear lesson here is that women are the land! So it is very instructive when Cross River says:

Ever since they discovered oil in our land, they drill, dry, and fry us alive with the fishes and farmlands all cooking in the oil. (Onwueme, 2003:139)

A perfect picture of exploitation!

Earlier on Oshimi: had said

Mothers, sons, and daughters of the land. It is I Oshimi, the umbilical cord, running all through these coasts from here to the Fouta Djallon mountain that speak. (Onwueme 2003:138)

By this speech, we begin to see that the land in question transcends national boundaries. Indeed Oshimi is the River Niger whose source is the Fouta Djallon.

Oshimi goes on to say

.... We are here, ready. My siblings from many shores. Today I speak to you... something strange, smelly, and strong is sapping our land. Why? Why? Why? Has it

always been so? What is happening to our... world....
Our land?

So we see that issues being tackled here are global but the image of land as represented by these rivers, the Niger even going beyond the shores of Nigeria are equated to women as an entity.

On page 186, we again encounter the stereotype notion of women cast as the plague afflicting the nation. Again on P. 183, the issue of women's rights is considered a cancerous growth in the belly of the land.

These views should be read as ironic against the overall back-drop of Onwueme's treatment of women emerging as the solution to issues of the leadership vacuum in the nation due to a failed government on certain issues of national development.

Topical Issues

So then what are some of the topical issues raised by Onwueme in her two plays '*What Mama Said*' and '*No Vacancy*'? These two plays are a mine-field of topical issues; so detailed that attempting to decipher them individually is a near impossible task for this effort. That Onwueme does not confine herself to local/national issues but extrapolates into global issues in one breath is fascinating but also compounds the attempt to decipher and enumerate. She could be talking about the politics of oil in Nigeria and at the same time 'casting stones' at the United States of America and global politics of oil and power. However we can safely identify her preoccupation in the two plays with injustice, human rights, environmental degradation, women issues (their subjugation and exploitation}, underdevelopment generally, youth restiveness due to unemployment on the global as well as the local levels. Her concerns touch also on the ills of capitalism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, racism and international trade etc. Issues like human trafficking are not left out of her concerns. It is against this background that we now seek to consider Onwueme as a committed, sensitive and creative artist who speaks for and seeks to lend voice to the voiceless. Her symbol of the voiceless and exploited is women.

Women in Onwueme's Plays

That women are a focal point of concern for Onwueme is obvious in a study of her plays namely: *What Mama Said*, and *No Vacancy*. Even an earlier play like *Legacies* in which the new role of militancy which she sketches for women is not quite obvious, we still see Mimi on a heroic quest to trace her

roots back to Africa from the United States of America. The attendant challenges she faces as obstacles to desired goals are heroically and doggedly tackled and at the end, she becomes a symbol of hope for the African in the Diaspora. And she is a woman!

Onwueme's presentation of women as a social group that is emerging (and must emerge) to take centre-stage in the struggle against societal evils like corruption, exploitation, injustice and subjugation, intimidation etc is in line with the global consciousness of the important place women must occupy for humanity's progress and development. In recognition of this the United Nation had declared 1975 as the international women's year with the policy of promoting equality, development, and peace in the world. Subsequently, the UN also declared the period between 1975 and 1985 as the decade for women. The rest of the strides made in bringing women aboard development, whether in politics, education or indeed in all areas of human endeavour is an open secret. Being an 'amazon' herself, Onwueme has chosen the platform of the stage to promote the cause of women. Treating a wide range of issues from the local to the global, she uses women to critique, assess and promote perspectives and views on these issues thereby also speaking for the voiceless and also giving them a voice. Although, she highlights the exploitation and subjugation of women in society, she also presents them as an emerging force which in conjunction with the youth must arise up and save the nation/globe from the downward spiral to destruction! So she calls on women "now women, beat beat the drums" (Onwueme 2003:22), calling women to militancy with war chants and dances. On p. 140 of *What Mama Said* when Cross-River cries out a mobilizing call, she is not addressing men but makes her call to "Mothers, Sons and Daughters." This is an indictment on the men of the land since they have sold out and joined hands with 'strangers' and marauders, they do not qualify to be part of the revolution. Women must lead the revolution to save the land!

Omi (on p.141 of *What Mama Said*) addressing her mother and other women cries out

"Mothers get ready! Sisters get ready!"

This is more of a universal call to women to rise up and put right the wrongs that fill our societies.

‘So again what did Mama say?’ She said “Mothers, Sisters, Get ready! Ready! Ready! (Onwueme 2003:141)

This means, ‘do not sit still’. Do not fold your hands. Do not just watch. Do something. Get involved.

But the women’s weapons of warfare must be different. They must employ innovative and alternative strategies; non- confrontational strategies to avoid blood-shed.

So Omi says

Mothers and sisters, you are not going to fight men with guns and bullets, with your bare hands and twigs? No mothers and sisters. We cannot. Must not play their bloody game. For that is what they are. Bloody! (p. 142)

The strategy the women must use in winning their battles against oppression, exploitation and subjugation is unity. They must fight with united souls! Unity among women will do the trick. So Imo says

“Our souls! United...” and the chorus of women answer back

“Our souls! Our spirits! Fight! Fight! (Onwueme, 2003: 142)

Later, on page 149 of *What Mama Said* Imo says;

“Trust us mothers. Times are changing. We your daughters are here”
(p. 147)

Hope lies with the daughters who must continue the struggle to liberate the land (women) from their oppressors.

Another important weapon women need is knowledge. Omi on p.150 says;

The most important weapon is not guns but knowledge. (p. 150)

“Yes, wisdom” concurs Imo.

So women must be mobilized in such a way that mothers must be taught revolutionary techniques by daughters (the young generation of women). Mothers must be prepared to be taught. They must be ready to be taught, for that is “what mama said”.

Underscoring the need for women to be united under one purpose Imo on p.153 says; "...remember , each one for all"

And

"Each one for everyone" as the chorus of women concurs. (p. 153)

At the end of Movement Nine of the play *What Mama Said*, the police swoop in on the women, handcuff some and take them away. The younger women, (in the spirit of the revolution led by Imo, regroup, re-mobilize, re-emerge) demonstrating their resilience. Women will be unstoppable as a united force is the message. The play direction at this point says,

(The struggle intensifies. The armed men throw tear gas into the crowd. The captives are led away. But soon the mob recovers; the girls first. They rouse the women once again)[Emphasis mine]. (p 154)

This is a gender war! The ideas expressed here are also very pertinent to feminist discourse. The underscoring idea is the message to women not to give up. The onus also seems to rest on younger women who must lead the struggle. So again Imo says when they are swooped on by the police and momentarily disbanded

"Is this the end of the journey?"

The women give a thunderous "Noooooooooo!" in reply as they March on to take the GRA/OIL CLUB.

The summary of this unfolding drama carries the message 'if our mothers could not rise up to fight injustice and subjugation due to ignorance, today's educated women through knowledge and wisdom must confront the evils that society renders towards women'. Today's woman must be in the vanguard of mobilizing all categories of women whether young or old, rural or urban, educated or non-educated and in collaboration with youth of either gender wage a social war against social ills like bad governance, corruption, nepotism, exploitation etc.

On p.179 (*What Mama Said*) Omi says to Oshimi and Cross-River.

"Thank you mothers. Go. Leave the rest to us"

This is significant. At this point, the mothers may need to relinquish the struggle for the younger generation. This is what seems to happen in the later

play NO VACANCY by Onwueme. The youth take over the struggle in “NO VACANCY”.

Again on p.180 Imo says:

“Mothers, remember your place. Stay in place”.

What is their place? No longer in the kitchen! They are occupying a new space, the public space. The place of relevance to effect sound change. They must remain conscious of this new position of relevance. They must sustain relevance. So in departing, both Oshimi and Cross-River- the older women, admonish the younger,

“Yes children. Take care” which could mean, ‘Yes children, take charge!’

In the next play to be considered *No Vacancy*, the youth have taken over. They take charge of the struggle.

No Vacancy

The issue of gender as represented in *No Vacancy* is over-arched by the new but concrete role of women as partners in revolution. The modern educated woman, as presented in this play can call the shots and make informed choices about destiny. She can be depended upon to be part of the struggle against prevailing social ills.

A number of topical issues are reflected in this play like: unemployment, non- funding-of-schools including universities, environmental degradation, election- malpractice, police- brutality, official- corruption, poverty, HIV/AIDS, terrorism etc.

The central image and object/symbol of the struggle in the play is Big Brother. Again Big Brother embodies both local and global dimensions. He could be a local military dictator or the American type Uncle Tom whose global policies impact negatively on the local space. On the local/national front, he is a despot who in collaboration with Uncle Tom, is selling out the state and growing hardship for the nation. The prevailing situation of non-availability of jobs, political repression, official corruption and general exploitation of the populace is the result of Big Brother’s failed policies and failing polity. Like in *What Mama Said*, *No Vacancy* seems to have magnified and progressed challenges that must be tackled by the revolutionary class of youth comprising both young women and young men.

The voices of LIBERTY, FREEDOM, JUSTICE, FAITH and EQUALITY are raised against Big Brother and his government. They however register a casualty in the struggle in the person of FAITH, who later turns his back on the revolution, selling out to the status quo.

Again issues raised in the play will be here briefly looked at.

First is the issue of money; the root of evil that is corrupting the society. On p.10, LIBERTY says;

Nonsense! Who cares? Really who cares nowadays about how you get there? It doesn't matter 'cos nothing matters anymore. Nothing. Except the heavy weight of Money. Power. Position... (Onwueme, 2005:1)

So money, Power, Position all go together.

The gender issue is also tackled quite frequently in the play. Sexist notions are repudiated and women are made to confront injustice, discrimination and disempowerment. On p.15 a vexed LIBERTY who is being called names by JUSTICE/DIRECTOR throws back;

Don't insult me –o! You bragging sexiest Quarter-baked nothing in the name of man! You hear? Just because you are lead...(pause) And did I say lead...? Leader, my foot! Whose? You think you're free to do or say whatever you like because you think I'm only a woman? Powerless? And jobless? (Onwueme, 2005:15)

In speeches like this it becomes clear that the playwright is raising issues beyond the immediate concerns of the play. She is the voice for all women, addressing sexism and attendant disempowerment, subjugation and intimidation of women.

The whole exchange in this encounter between LIBERTY/SEX WORKER and JUSTICE/DIRECTOR explores the war of sexes and highlights the emerging image of a liberated and educated woman who is no longer sitting down trampled upon by sexist men and their unprogressive and chauvinistic notions about women.

So LIBERTY could say, again speaking for all the new emerging breed of women;

.... Don't take me for you football... I know just who I am. I know myself! In spite of the many odds stacked up against me, I'm doing something... Something... (Onwueme, 2005:22)

We could write volumes on the various issues that are raised by Onwueme in these two plays. Our concern has however been to illustrate topicality and her tackling of 'gender' as part of the global discourse of the woman question which itself is a topical issue.

Conclusion

From our discussion of these issues we have observed that Onwueme is not just reflecting current and prevailing issues of the society, she is actively critiquing the various situations and scenarios that have given rise to these issues. She is also inviting her audience to join her in this evaluation of society both at the national and global levels. By this critique and evaluation she is in turn making a call for change in our social systems for a better future.

Her hope for the future however seems to be vested in the youth both male and female. (This is gender epitomized). Both male and female must work for the public good and for this to happen women must be recognized as equal partners in development. The youth must not give up their dream of a better future since they are the future. So FREEDOM on page 64 (*No Vacancy*) calls out to the youth to stretch their dreams.

FREEDOM (saluting FAITH)

Get hold of your dreams, brother!...I say, get hold of your dream brother!

Later JOBSEEKERS all respond

JOBSEEKERS

Stretch your – dream – dream – dreeeeeaaaam!

(Onwueme 2005:64)

At the end of the play, just like in *What Mama Said*, the youth are unstoppable in spite of all efforts to subdue them. The revolutionary spirit is

rekindled after every set-back from the powers that be. The following summarizes the situation

(...Suddenly gunshots. Intense struggle at the presidential palace as some of the near invisible presidential guards mount fierce resistance against the insurgents around the statue of Big Brother. As the struggle intensifies, JUSTICE is shot and wounded. LIBERTY bends down to bandage the soaked injury. She kisses/caresses his wound as she sobs until a heavy blast hits her and she falls over JUSTICE. They stay locked in each other's arms until JUSTICE dies. FREEDOM blasts the face of Big Brother and it topples, breaking into pieces. At last, the invisible presidential guards are overwhelmed and subdued as the armed youths take over their strategic posts/positions). [Emphasis mine]

The symbolisms in this stage direction are various, but are not all relevant to the subject of our discussion here. The symbolism of a failed state/government and that of the take-over of the youth as the hope of the future however are pertinent to our current discourse. The playwright here places the hope for the future of the nation and indeed the world upon an educated youth, an informed youth, a determined and resilient youth, who must shun bigotry of any form and work together as one youth, embracing (both) gender, for the good of the society.

So when FREEDOM on page 93 (Onwueme, 2005) makes his concluding speech, the implications are clear. Says he,

... My people! Its over! Yesterday's cancelled. Here now we are, today. Exhausted. Sick. And tomorrow? All we've got. That's new. Together, look at it...tomorrow. Together, work for it...tomorrow...and tomorrow. Who says we can't deliver it live? But still...? Who? My people, let me say it again and again. We've got nothing new. Only it. Tomorrow. It's all in your hands. Use it...

Onwueme: the Revolutionary Artist; the Liberated Woman!

Onwueme's identification with the causes of the down-trodden in society places her on the same pedestal as any revolutionary artist like Brecht, Osafisan and Sowande, to name a few. Indeed her episodic presentation of

action and plot is very Brechtian in style and approach. The didacticism of the contents of her plays is also not unlike Brecht. Every action/event in her play seems to present her with didactic opportunity. This plus her sensitivity to history and global trends augment her relevance on the African stage and beyond.

As a feminist, she is not shy about telling women what they must do to liberate themselves from the shackles of sexism and the hegemony of patriarchy which prevail in the global social space. She has done this effectively in the plays *What Mama Said* and *No Vacancy* as demonstrated above.

Note:

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Forms of Political Consciousness in the Poetry of Tanure Ojaide: A Study of *The Endless Song* and *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* (Pp. 168-176)

Bassey Ude Bassey - Centre for General Studies, Cross River University
of Technology, Ogoja Campus, Cross River State
E-mail: bu_bassey@yahoo.com
Phone: +234 803 6014 263

Abstract

Tanure Ojaide has become a major force in contemporary Nigerian poetry. Indeed, in the generation of Nigerian writers after the Achebe – Clark – Okigbo – Soyinka era, Ojaide's ascendancy is incontrovertible. This relevance is not just in the prolificacy of his output, but also in his social relevance as the voice of the voiceless. With particular emphasis on The Endless Song and When it no longer Matters where you live, this paper shows how Ojaide uses his craft to comment on the political reality of his day. The paper also posits that far from being an indifferent commentator, the poet is a fully partisan recorder of the struggles that play out on the Nigerian national political scene.

Introduction

Poetry as poetry ought to be able to deal with any experience that is human, and the political experience is certainly human. No man interested, as the poet must be, in the life of the society to which he belongs can possibly ignore it.

Archibald MacLeish
"The Poet and the Age"