

PLAYWRIGHTS AND THE TASK OF BUILDING STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS: INTERROGATING INTRA-GENDER SUBJUGATION IN NIGERIAN PLAYS

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Abstract

*Most efforts made towards elevating the condition of women foreground the complicity of man in the former's subjugation. Women are usually depicted in feminist drama as the passive recipients of the combination of man's excesses and the repressive phallogocentric universe. Hence some feminist plays privileging the monolithic view of women support this claim. By way of reframing this narrative and social construct, intra-gender studies elucidate some cultural and pathological antecedents that ex ray women-on-women violence and discordant relationships. This study thus investigates intra-gender subjugation in the works of some Nigerian playwrights, using the content and interpretative approach of the qualitative research methodology. Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Who Owns This Coffin?* are case studies whose critical analysis are anchored on Kimberly Crenshaw's *Intersectional feminism*. The study reveals the affirmation of African playwrights that women actually subjugate themselves and that playwrights have been highlighting these issues for purposes of exposition and critical attention. The study concludes that the age long wish of women in terms of attaining emancipation and equity can be achieved through the elimination/dismantling of oppressive cultural and patriarchal structures thereby achieving freedom from social and economic inequality..*

Introduction

Stephanie Arnold, in *The Creative Spirit: An Introduction to Theatre*, notes that the impulse to perform by interpreting human existence through the presentation of characters on stage has translated into varieties of astonishing theatre traditions. According to him, “when we act a part, when we take on a role, we seek to transform ourselves through the construction of a new identity” (3). Across cultures and continents, the theatre responds to the unique worldviews of differing human communities and develops forms of expression that reflect specific community concerns and community aesthetics. For Robert Cohen, in *Theatre*, what separates theatre from other art forms is its ability to involve actors who impersonate characters. In his analogy,

[t]he acts of impersonation, with or without an actual mask; depends on an implicit agreement or set of agreements between actor and audience. The agreement, in essence is that the actor will pretend to ‘be’ a character and the audience will pretend to ‘see’ him or her as that character (20).

It is true that the dramatic character is represented by a living person who goes through the motions of the character’s acts and, in many cases, experiences them fully as well. It is also true that some characters are drawn from life and their dialogue may be taken from the actual transcripts of a historical event. Nevertheless, the character is not ‘somebody else’ but an artistic fabrication—a shaped essence that gains acceptance as a real person only by virtue of the implicit agreement between actor and audience.

From a historical standpoint, Edward Wright, in *Understanding Today’s Theatre*, informs that since the beginning of Western drama in ancient Greece, the playwright has had certain tools with which to work (176). In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, these tools were fable, manners, sentiment, diction, melody and scenery but in

modern times, they have been called the six elements of drama and include story, character and thought, which are expressed through dialogue, mood and spectacle. He notes that, however, over time, playwrights have given varying degrees of importance to these elements. According to him “some chose to emphasize story, others the characters and some the theme...” (39). He stressed further that the characters which a playwright creates and the philosophies, ideas, actions and problems he pictures must be vital and interesting, since they have serious implications on the consumers—the audience.

For Brockett and Ball, character is the primary material from which plots are created because incidents are developed through the speech and behaviour of dramatic personages. According to them, “characterization is anything that delineates a person or differentiates that person from others” (41). They also identify the various levels of characterization to include physical or biological, societal, psychological and moral. Further, they note that, “Moral decisions differentiate characters more fully than any other type, deliberating about such decisions causes characters to examine their values and motives, in the process of which their true natures are revealed both to themselves and to the audience” (42). On the whole, it is worthy to note that, although characters are “imaginary people that populate the universe of a play” (Nwabueze *Studies* 14), their portrayal speaks volumes of a playwright’s opinions of them. This explains the basis for this research which examines the issue of intra-gender subjugation of women, with a view to ascertaining how creative writers’ portraits of feminist characters in Nigerian plays have ballooned to the creation of strong women characters whose conducts, in pursuit of gender equality, sometimes constitute a troubling challenge to other (marginal) female characters in the same text.

Theoretical Framework

This research is foregrounded in Kimberly Crenshaw's intersectional feminism developed in 1989. Basically, Intersectionality is a theoretical resource for analysis and advocacy that interrogates multiple discriminations and facilitates a nuanced understanding of how different kinds of identities define the extent to which a woman can access certain rights and opportunities. It is common within feminist theory to state that the lives of women are built on multiple, interlocking systems of subjugation. That is, the insight that women's subjugation is not a monolithic procedure or a twofold political relation, but a product of multiple intersecting systems is traceable to "antiracist feminist critiques of the claim that women's oppression could be captured through an analysis of gender alone" (Carastathis 304). Carastathis further asserts that:

The metaphor of intersecting categories of discrimination was introduced and later elaborated by the Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, one of the founders of Critical Race Theory in the U.S. legal academy. Yet intersectionality has a long history in Black feminism. Its antecedents include the notions of 'double jeopardy' or 'multiple jeopardy', and 'interlocking oppressions'. As early as the 19th century in the United States, Black feminists confronted the simultaneity of a 'woman question' and a 'race problem' (305).

Generally black feminist hold the view that black women are doubly oppressed: first, for being women and second, because of their skin colour. Hence, regardless of the peculiarities of individual black women, they collectively suffer the 'double jeopardy' of classification and group identifications. The point of intersectional feminism is that it attempts to simplify often muddled

identities that fail to tackle the distinctiveness of members of a given group identity. The trouble with identity politics is not only that it fails to go beyond differences/dissimilarities, but instead the reverse: it constantly unifies or disregards the differences that exist among varying members of a particular group. As Crenshaw clarifies:

this elision of difference is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring differences within groups frequently contributes to tension among groups, another problem of identity politics that frustrates efforts to politicize violence against women. Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. And so, when the practices expound identity as "woman" or "person of color" as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling (1241).

Crenshaw goes forward to formulate the telling of that location by examining the gendered and race-based violence against black women, women of colour and all other non-white women. Her basic contention is that "contemporary feminist and antiracist discourses have failed to consider the intersections of racism and patriarchy" (1241); Emphasizing two aspects of men's violence against women—battering and rape—Crenshaw discusses

Structural Intersectionality and Political Intersectionality. According to her, Structural Intersectionality shows “the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different from that of white women” (1242). She cites examples of a reality in Los Angeles where the shelters of women of colour in minority communities were destroyed. Mostly burdened by child-rearing responsibilities, unemployment and poverty, they resort to the kind of shelters they lived in which were demolished. Any attempt to resolve this problem of demolished accommodation for such women must zero into their specific conditions such as poor education, unemployment and poverty in order to address their issues fully. Re-building the shelters without interrogating societal factors that pushed them into such squalid apartments in the first place would produce counter-productive results. Here lies the uniqueness of intersectionality. Ordinarily, contemporary feminist analyses would not close in on the particular situations of these poor, unemployed women of colour but rather group them all as women, without taking into cognizance the reality that the label ‘women’ includes superrich white women, privileged black women and even educated women of colour among others. This rationalises intersectional feminism as an antidote to marginalizations and exclusions within feminist philosophy, seeks to integrate all of these concerns and to combat multiple forms of prejudice simultaneously. It recognizes that not all oppressions can be analyzed at once, but it aims to avoid single-factor analyses that neglect the evaluatively salient intersections between relevant axes of oppressions (Ciurria 2).

Intersectional feminism is important to this research as it enables the reader to recognize the futility of addressing all issues of oppression in one breath and it also enables the reader to understand the multiple prejudices and social structures that

conjunct to frustrate individuals or a small sub-set of women, thereby disregarding the totalizing approach to addressing women's challenges. This singular approach to confronting women's oppression is at the core of Crenshaw's theorizations.

Synopsis of Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*

Wedlock of the Gods is a play that explores obnoxious cultural practices that facilitate the dehumanization and oppression of female folks in the African traditional society. Zulu Sofola tactically delves into gender politics, women's right and the role of superstition in perpetuation of a social order where the fundamental human rights of the African woman is completely trapped upon by their male counterparts. In this tragic drama, Sofola presents a tragic character, Ogwoma who is forced into marriage with a man she neither knows nor loves. Ogwoma's marriage is contracted because her parent needs the bride price (money) to pay for the treatment of her sick brother. Ogwoma is further made to suffer more in the hands of this obnoxious cultural practice when her husband Adigwu dies unexpectedly. The culture requires her to mourn her husband for three months after which she will as a matter of obligation and tradition marry Okezie her husband's brother at the end of the mourning period.

Ogwoma cannot cope with this harmful culture targeted against women and therefore did not fulfill the passages rites which will prepare her to marry Okezie and also ensure the swift transition of the husband's spirit to the great beyond. On the contrary, Ogwoma considers herself freed and rather than engaging in the normal funeral rites and rituals which should have cleansed her and sent the spirit of the deceased to the world of the gods, she becomes pregnant for Uloko, the man she has always known and loved. Her actions are considered a taboo and consequently she is accused by Odibei, Adigwu's mother of intentionally killing her son so she can be with her lover. Odibei vowed to avenge her son's death and she continued to trouble Ogwoma and lover all through the story.

Ogwoma and Uloko have suffered lots of tribulation eventually died but even in death they remain resolute to love each other.

Synopsis of Tracie Chima Utoh's *Who Own's This Coffin?*

Tracie Chima Utoh's play *Who Own's this Coffin?* Written in 1999, centers on intra-gender subjugation of female folks in the Nigerian society. The play opens with a prologue that shows the need for women to unite and fight for their emancipation and freedom. The narrator is of the opinion that women must in their unity develop themselves; that way the stereotyped gender rules foisted on women will be dismantled. The Idea projected in the play is the agitation of women's rights, empowerment, and elevation in all economic, political and leadership positions, and that will eventually bring about gender equilibrium. Thus in situation one of the play the women inaugurated a group known as the dynamic women dance group in order to bring all women together and work towards achieving their goal of women emancipation and freedom.

Immediately after the inauguration of dynamic women dance group, the first official meeting of the group was held. The leaders of the women executives; Madam Ekwutosi, Hajia Binta, and Mrs. Amtu lost vision of the main aim for the formation of the group. They began to adopt strategies and programs that will ensure and enhance male domination, subjugation and oppression. Instead of these women leaders to take their defiance, fight and agitation to the men, they seek to intimidate and oppress other women in the group who have different opinions. Through the meeting their subordinates discover that they have no humanistic, 'communitarian' and governmental point of view for their fellow women; but rather ulterior gratifying selfish motives. Madam Ekwutosi, Hajia Binta, and Mrs. Amtu who are supposed to be the shepherds protecting the other women ironically turn wolves in shepherds clothing. They hold disgust for genuine ideas and attempt to dictate for those whom they are supposed to buy their ideas and style of governance. Under the administration of Hajia Binta, the

standard of education deteriorated, she accepted bribes and admitted under-qualified candidates. Tyrant Mrs. Amtu on the other hand collected bribes and failed to give contracts or allocation to qualified members. While Madam Ekwutosi whores around, thinking that availing men of sexual favours will help her climb the political ladder. These women used their position and leadership in the society to amass wealth, live flamboyant life styles and oppress fellow women. When all odds came against them because of their crimes, they asked for help from Mrs. Sijuade, a principled, disciplined, determined, confident woman who is highly respected in the society. However, Mrs. Sijuade, refused to get involved in covering up their dubious acts. They get infuriated and threatened to deal with her. Madam Ekwutosi, Mrs. Amutu and Hajia Binta's diabolism to deal with Mrs. Sijuade is however exposed by Nimma, Mariam and Nkoli their children.

Issues of Intra Gender Subjugation in the Selected Literary Texts

I. Culture and Tradition

Culture is a people's way of life and the idea that the culture of a people should be respected cannot be over emphasized. Edward, B. Tyler believes that culture "is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"(quoted in. Helen Spencer Oatey, 2). Nevertheless, there are many cultural practices in Nigeria and Africa at large that are harmful and discriminatory. These obnoxious cultural practices in many instances are chiefly targeted against women. It has been argued that many African societies are patriarchal in nature and this has helped to perpetuate the oppression of female folks as a culturally accepted norm. Makama, Godiya explains that:

In Nigeria, it is observed that the womanhood is reduced to ... a second-class citizen; hence, there is the commonality

of general belief system that the best place for women is in the 'Kitchen'. This trend has brought about tremendous misrepresentation of women right at the level of the family down to the circular society. The Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature which is a major feature of a traditional society (115).

The patriarchal order that is prevalent in many communities in Nigeria to a great extent do violates the fundamental human right of women. One of such instance that the harmful cultural practices come to the fore to oppress and marginalize women is the issue of widowhood and widowhood inheritance.

Widowhood Rites and Widowhood Inheritance

The Indo-European word "widow" simply means to be empty and is literally used to refer to a woman that has lost her husband through death especially one who has not remarried. She is empty of her husband, who is her crown and pride because a woman in African context is believed to be valuable and complete with a husband. In this period, the bereaved mourn their loss and in many places they are expected to undergo a series of rituals referred to as widowhood rites. Widowhood rites as practiced in many traditional African societies are cultural practices that accompany the loss of one's spouse. Ajayi, Lady Adaina, et al and other states that:

In the Nigerian context which could be the case in other African countries, women whose spouses are deceased are subjected to numerous widowhood rites that expose their vulnerability. These rites include; consuming the water used to wash the corpse, sleeping in the same room where the corpse is laid, forced to marry her deceased husband's brother, confined to a room and forced to sit on ashes, served food on broken plates and in some cases, prohibited from gazing at the person who served the meal, and in some

cases they are restricted to wearing certain colours, styles or tattered clothes for a period of time (this vary across cultures) (2).

The most pathetic situation in this widowed oppression and subjugation is the role played by the women in implementing these often shocking and distressing laws and in maintaining the traditional structures which supports the practices. Zulu Sofola in *Wedlock of the Gods* depicts an African society where this battle of the sexes is inherent. She brings a new paradigm and suggests that more often than none women are the cultural agents that enforce obnoxious cultural practices against fellow women. Firstly, she established the idea of forced marriage which is a contravention of the fundamental human rights. The protagonist, Ogwoma is forcefully given away in marriage to Adigwu; a man she does not love. The whole marriage is contracted because her parent needs to raise money through her bride price so they can treat his sick brother. The idea of forced marriage where a woman has no say or choice in whom she gets married to is a social reality inherent in the Nigerian traditional society. This practice has survived the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Nigerian society. To this end, Anju Malhotra states that:

Forced marriage is a pervasive problem across the developing world, affecting the lives of millions of girls. It violates their human rights and it severely impedes global development efforts. Forced marriage undermines initiatives to raise girls' education, to reduce maternal mortality, and to increase employment and enterprise levels (2).

In the play *Wedlock of the Gods*, Ogwoma is a typical example of the victim Anju explains in above. It is traditionally not within the place of a woman to reject betrothal and so Ogwoma must and remain married to Adigwu even when the marriage is not

working. Ogwoma's parents and even her mother-in-law are aware that the union in which Ogwoma and Adigwu are into is an unhappy one yet they remained indifferent. The pains and agony Ogwoma is passing through in the name of marriage became more complicated with the death of her husband. "His death is mysterious and places suspicion in the mind of his mother, Odibei. Odibei who is Ogwoma's mother-in-law had never liked Ogwoma and for this has every reason to doubt Ogwoma's innocence over her son's death"(11). With the twist in the story, Sofola introduces the idea of women subjugation by women in the play. The women of the society in which Ogwoma lives takes it upon themselves to see that all the patriarchal cultures expected to be carried out by a widow is upheld. Ogwoma is expected to sleep in a house where everything is out-of-place and her resting position the fire place amidst ashes, she is expected to mourn Adigwu for a period of three months. Thus Odibei her mother in-law is seen at the beginning of the play examining her daughter in-law's house to make sure her son is bemourned exactly as stipulated by the tradition of the land.

(Ogwoma's house. The room reflects a place of mourning. Some stools and household utensils are placed at random on the floor, shelves and by the sleeping mat, all near a fire place where coking materials are also kept. There is an inner room, but Ogwoma sleeps by the fire as she is still in mourning. The fire is out, but there are ashes and a few short pieces of firewood. Two doors lead outside. Odibei enters from the back door. She is sad and bitter. She examines the ashes the mat then proceeds to search the other objects more intently ...) (Sofola, 5).

Sofola in *Wedlock of the Gods*, subtly tries to draw attention to widowhood inheritance as one of the customs that debases women and makes them oppress their fellow women. Tradition demands Ogwoma is inherited by Okezie, the brother of her deceased

husband Adigwu to continue to keep the husband lineage. The men however, are somehow silent on the issue quietly deliberating on what actions to take without disturbing much. Ogwoma refuses to keep to this tradition and her defiance of this rite brings antagonistic behavior of her fellow women to her. Women who are in this case considered as their own worst enemies are keen about enforcing cultures that enthrone subjugation and oppression. Another instance that the harmful cultural practices come to the fore to oppress and marginalize women is the issue of parental role.

Parental Role

In Africa as elsewhere parents are seen as the first teacher of their children. Children in various family environments acquire a lot of experiences through various activities and are constantly exposed to varieties of influence and expectations from the people he or she lives with. However, the birthright of nature gives mother's the upper hand in the upbringing of children. They are powerful shapers of children's lives and they are expected to take full responsibilities for the daily life and welfare of children as people can blame mothers for whatever that goes wrong. Hence mothers as part of an already existing society or culture, impacts back that which they have internalized over the years to their offsprings, no wonder Paulina Palmer "sees the role of woman especially the mother, as that of a tool of patriarchy" (466). In *Wedlock of the God's*, Nneka, Ogwoma's mother as a patriarchal tool reminds her daughter of those patriarchal culture or norms that has become parts of them, and must be carried out as normal way of live. One ordinarily will expect that as a mother she should stand by her daughter and make efforts to shield her from the damaging effects of harmful cultural practices against women but there is no significant difference between her opinions over the dehumanizing tradition. She completely supported the idea of Ogwoma's marriage to Adigwu. This forced marriage is the beginning of all the tragic things that happened to Ogwoma. Ogwoma laments, "What have I done to

them? I have fought for the past four years to marry the man I love, but these people will not let it be. I was tied and whipped along the road to Adigwu. Now that God has freed me, they still say I am his brother's wife"(Sofola, 21). Nneka sees nothing wrong in the selling of her daughter like a commodity. Instead she sees Ogwoma's actions as the violation of the worst taboo in the land. One wonders, what made Ogwoma's defiance a taboo? If not the myths used in tying them down so that they become ardent adheres of these traditions thus:

Nneka: Do you know that the punishment for this deed is a swelling of the body with water leaking from everywhere? Do you know that nobody will agree to treat you for fear they might also catch your curse? Do you know that even after death no forest will accept your body? ... (Sofola, 19).

It appears from inference that these women act in fear. Out of fear they tend to pass this to their children to avoid fallen victims of such oppressive laws made by man, thus women indirectly become the formative structure of women subjugation. The cry, pains and agony of a daughter who is a victim of obnoxious cultural practices did not in any way make Nneka to see things from her daughter's point of view. Nneka believes that her daughter Ogwoma should bear whatsoever is the outcome of her marriage with Adigwu. She rebukes her thus:

Your tongue is bad and your heart is a rock. Any good daughter with a dying brother would have told her parents to give her away to a husband and use her bride wealth to cure her brother. You did not do that. We did the best the poor parents of a dying son could have done and all we now get from you is shame and disgrace (Sofola,18).

Nneka became a custodian and advocate of women oppression in the society. She believes levirate tradition and thus argues with Ogwoma that she has no right to chose Uloko as her man because it is against the culture and that she should be inherited by Okezie. Nneka tells Ogwoma that “You are a man’s wife, dead or alive. Adigwu has a brother and you are his wife” (Sofola, 20). To this end, Omoruyi, Elizabeth explains that:

Nneka not empathic to her daughter’s plight insists on her carrying out tradition by marrying the surviving brother of her late husband. Within the Anioma society, and indeed the traditional Igbo ethnic group that Sofola writes from, when a man dies childless, the wife is made-over to the younger brother to father children for him. In this case, children born by the brother through the woman answers the name of the deceased and inherited his properties. It is my opinion that Sofola only use *Wedlock of the Gods* to draw global attention to a cultural practice that denies woman the power to speak and make personal choice in spousal selection (21).

On the other hand, Ogwoma’s friend Anwasia is planted as a check on her, right from the inception of the play, to constantly remind her that what she has done is a taboo, a sacrilege and unheard of because deep down in her subconscious nature she has been trained to behave and know a particular way girls are supposed to behave. Ordinarily, friends are supposed to be supportive to each other even when family seems to have deserted them. Bellah, Robert and others state that “Friends must enjoy each other’s company, they must be useful to one another, and they must share a common commitment to the good” (115). The friendship or bond Ogwoma shares with a fellow woman does not confirm to the definition of friendship according to Roberts. In the play, when Ogwoma runs to her friend and laments on how bad and harmful cultural practices on women have been to her and how she is

resolute to fight for her emancipation she did not get any form of support from her friend.

Ogwoma was instead persuaded by Anwasia to forget about all forms of agitation and yield herself completely to be dehumanized. The call made by Ogwoma is for all marginalized women to come together, rise up and fight for their emancipation. As a woman, Anwasia should have bought into the idea of women liberation. She never did, rather she persuades Ogwoma to allow herself to be dehumanized and oppressed as the culture demands. She says, “listen Ogwoma, a friend must always be honest and truthful. It is a common thing, that when a man dies his brother takes his wife. This is what our people do. Everyone knows that” (Sofola, 21).

Despite so much persuasion and negativity from Anwasia, Ogwoma decides to assert her rights. Ogwoma through her action is a lone fighter against women oppression. She fights the patriarchal order that is predominant in the society and also fight fellow women who instead of bonding and supporting the cause she champions are the major obstacle in quest for self-actualization and emancipation. According to Osita Ezenwanebe:

The Modernist’s psychological theory of drama which locates truth in the subconscious supports Ogwoma’s choice of inner truth or reality so also does interactions perspective on society which posits that the meaning of an action depends on the interpretation given to it by the actors or performers of the action (11)

Ezewanebe through this quote captures the possible psycho-analytic reason that propels Ogwoma to go ahead with boycotting the three months period of mourning. At the end of this mourning period, Ogwoma is supposed to marry her late husband’s brother, Okezie. She goes ahead and commits a taboo by getting pregnant for Uloko her lover. Ogwoma is aware of the consequences of her

action yet she does not bugle because for her the death of Adigwu marks the end of agony and suffering in her life and her rekindled love affair with Uloko is supposed to usher in new beginning in her life. Anwasia justifies the idea of Ogwoma forceful marriage and claims that once it is culturally accepted, it is right. This is evident in the following lines from the play, “Ogwoma, our people say that a man’s daughter is a source of wealth to him. Your parents needed the money for a very expensive sacrifice for your brother whom sickness almost killed. You should have been happy that your money saved the life of your own brother” (Sofola, 9). Anwasia, a friend and fellow woman is in support of all the ill treatment given to Ogwoma and admonishes her to endure it. She supports the forced marriage to Adigwu and enjoins her to marry Okezie. In this instance, her action validates the assertion that women are their worst enemies hence the idea of women subjugation against women.

Utoh in *Who Owns this Coffin?* Posits parental role as a striking factor in which women are not humane to their fellow women. Madam Ekwutosi, Aima’s mother represents the mother figure on the one hand and on the other hand, woman as oppressor. As a mother she is not so sweet to her daughter and much of what she said to her daughter that is ultimately hurtful was engaged under the veiled intention of having her best interest in mind, “Aima, you know I want the best for you. That is why I sent you to the University. By next year, you will become a graduate. If you heed my advice and marry the right person, the sky will be your limit...” (Utoh, 45). Madam Ekwutosi choice of right person is the same man she has slept with for years, and she deems him fit for her daughter. One would expect Madam Ekwutosi to show some motherly understanding and care to her daughter whom she conceived and bore in her womb for nine months but the reverse is the case here, as Madam Ekwutosi oppresses and treats her daughter like a dummy who has no mind of its own. Mrs. Amtu’s action further buttresses the point that parental role place in the hands of

women by patriarchal society makes them subjugate their fellow women with the slogan of having their best interest at heart. She goes ahead to encourage Aima to heed to her mother's advice which she buttresses is for her own good, and her defiance she sees as been stubborn.

Societal Stigma

Societal stigma is the extreme disparagement, mockery or scorn on an individual because of a particular trait that indicates their deviance from social norm. Without a society, one cannot have stigma and this is not without its traumatic consequences, such as bottled up emotions and duplication of experience. As far as stigmatization is concerned Africans do not like to be stigmatized. As a result, parents suppress their emotions towards their children so that they can avoid been stigmatized and avoid looking like weaklings in the presence of their mates that uphold the accepted norm. They would do anything to avoid caricature or mockery from them.

In *Wedlock of the Gods* Ogwoma's mother-in-law Odibei champions the punishment, dehumanization and oppression of Ogwoma in her quest for emancipation and self-actualization. Odibei the mother of her husband, Adigwu swears to fight Ogwoma with all her might for defiling the traditions. She strongly believes that the actions of Ogwoma are responsible for the death of her son. Odibei, a fellow woman began to subjugate, oppress and dehumanize Ogwoma. She lays various false accusations on Ogwoma and also uses derogatory language on her. This is evident in the following lines in the play:

Otubo: (disgusted) what are you looking for?

Odibei: I am looking for the medicine she used

Otubo: What if there is no medicine

Odibei: Then it is her harlotry that killed my son (Sofola, 6).

Odibei use derogatory language register on Ogwoma by calling her a harlot. Derogatory language is one of the viable tools used to perpetuate female gender oppression and subjugation in many African traditional societies. Agozie Ugwu and Ikechukwu Erojikwe states that:

To continually maintain the patriarchal status quo, the male folks have over the years institutionalized some strategies to perpetuate the existence of this order. Language obviously is one of the strong vehicle through which cultural practices are driven, sustained and maintained. The use of discriminatory language registers have be a tool the male folks have explored in preserving the patriarchal society (322)

It is expected that the major perpetuator of female gender subjugation and oppression are in many instances the male folks but Sofola through the character of Odibei bring an interesting paradigm to the subjugation of female folks in the African setting. Odibei knows very well that anyone known as a harlot in the society in which the play is situated carries social stigma. Her agenda apparently is not even looking for the medicine Ogwoma used to kill her son but to set a social stigmatization agenda where the narrative will be that Ogwoma is a harlot. People in the village will believe her story that she is a harlot. The entire community is also displeased with Ogwoma for refusing to abide with the cultural ordinances of mourning her husband and also refusing to be inherited by Okezie her husband's brother. Thus, Odibei action towards Ogwoma is to ensure that she suffers for not yielding herself to the whims and caprices of obnoxious cultural practices. In all, the entire ordeal Ogwoma suffered, Sofola carefully omitted the involvement of male character in the oppression and subjugation of Ogwoma. No wonder Uchem, Rose argues that:

A long and continuous experience of collective male oppression produces in women this psychological and sociological phenomenon called internalized oppression. It is characterized by an unconscious self-hatred, low-self-image, inferiority complex; hatred and oppression of one's own kind, in this case, fellow women, especially those in weaker or more vulnerable positions than oneself (101).

As members of the community presented by Sofola in her play, Nneka and Ogoli's antagonistic nature towards themselves and towards Ogwoma is because Ogwoma went contrary to the general accepted norm of the people thereby bringing shame to them. The shame and shock among their tribesmen and mockery from their fellow women who have lived up to this societal opinion give them the determination to oppress Ogwoma their fellow woman in order to restore their so called dignity and also, to hate Odibei for dragging them to the mud. According to Nneka "I heard everything and I cannot walk on the road for shame. (Silent resentment from Ogwoma)" (Sofola, 22), on another occasion the issue is captured between Anwasia and Ogoli thus:

Anwasia: ...things are already getting out of control. Odibei has already told the whole town about last night. I had to leave the market because of gossips.

Ogoli: (bursting into the house unexpectedly) where is that shameless goat that wants to take all I have from me?

Anwasia: (to Ogoli) Nne, what is the matter?

Ogoli: I could not sell a grain of salt in the market because of this dog... (Sofola, 22).

The anger that Odibei exposed Ogwoma thus led to further exchange of antagonistic words between Nneka and Odibei

Odibie: Cows have tails and the blind man has his stick, but with nothing you will walk into death swollen-stomached and leaking through both ends.

Nneka: (to Odibei) you will be buried alive from your shoulders down and with your mouth, you will eat the flies that swarm on your head (Sofola,49).

Sofola's play *Wedlock of the Gods* appears to depict that culture stipulates and conditions the inhabitants with acceptable norms and practices for one to belong as a member.

Greed/Selfishness

Another root cause of intra-gender subjugation and failure of female friendship is greed/selfishness. Greed according to Robertson, A.F. is the selfish desire to possess wealth, substance, objects, people, power, status, appreciation or attention far beyond what is required for basic human comfort (qtd in Jeevan, D. Souza 1). It creates social conflict as those who lose out resent those who win more than, thereby leading to the subjugation of women considered as lesser being by the winning women group. However, unrestrained greed in an individual can lead to callousness, arrogance or caring for personal interest without paying sufficient attention to the subjugated group. Greed has many forms such as greed for life, greed for money or material wealth, greed for power, for love, for knowledge to mention but a few. In all greed is the matriarchy of dissatisfaction, emptiness and discontentment.

Women in Position of Power

Women in Nigeria and in other climes have been agitating for women's inclusion in the polity and politics. It has been argued by many scholars that the inclusion of women in politics and leadership positions in Nigeria and other African countries could serve as a propeller for the rapid development in Africa. To this end, Uzoechi, Nwagbara maintains that

The political marginalization of women in Nigeria is a rectilinear upshot of their low participation in government and politics necessitated by patriarchy. This patriarchal practice has animated the urgency of expanded public sphere as well as feminism, an ideological, aesthetic and cultural movement, steeped in agitating for the rights of women and expanding the frontiers of their participation in the political process. In the political novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, Chinua Achebe has deftly refracted the rise of new Nigerian women, who are generation changers (3).

Actually Nigerian women have given a quota in the leadership positions over the years. This is to say that their long fought feminist ag Actually Nigerian women have given a quota in the leadership positions over the years. This is to say that their long fought feminist agitations have been yielding fruits. They are still agitating that the number of leadership position held by men should be propitiated to that of women. Nevertheless, it appears that many of the women who have held leadership positions in Nigeria are not without blames for their underperformance and even using their positions to oppress fellow women.

In her first published play, *Who Own's this Coffin*, Tracie Utoh depicts how women are major problem of fellow women in the society. The women in this play agreed that the major reasons why the female folks are marginalized are because of the men. They therefore formed a movement to fight for their emancipation. Immediately after the inauguration of the Women Dance Group the leaders of the group deviate from the ideology which formed the group. The Group at its inception had hoped to put women in various leadership positions, help fellow women get education and acquire skills that will automatically consolidate their rightful position in the society. They had aimed not to be perpetually tied to the gender roles assigned to them within the ambit of the culture.

This is evident in the following lines by Madam Ekwutosi in the play,

Dynamic women, you are welcome to this August occasion. Women all over the world are rising up to fight suppression, oppression, intimidation, marginalization and all other crimes perpetuated by the opposite gender. Our women shall not be left behind. We, the women leaders of this community, have put up our heads together and initiated a plan, which is intend to advance the course of women in this community (Utoh, 18).

After, the inauguration, the leadership of the group assumed office and the whole agenda establishing the organization was set aside. Madam Ekwutosi immediately started her tenure with as a dictator. She quickly fines all the absentees from the meeting and goes on to give orders on how she wants the dance group to operate without tolerating any opinion from the members of the group. She is being supported by her executive members who are resolute to use the platform for personal aggrandizement and oppression of fellow women. The authoritarian system of governance adopted by Madam Ekwutosi and her executives against fellow women is illustrated in the dialogue below,

Mrs. Tansi: No. I mean the leaders of the Women's Movement in our community. The pioneers. Those work tirelessly to advance the cause of women. Those who fought like tigers to lend women voice in this community. Women such as Margret Ekpo, Chief Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Hajia Gambo Sawaba and a host of others.

Madam Ekwutosi: We shall compose song about our heroes no doubt, but we must start with the leaders of our community. Those in authority. Our king, his cabinet ministers and the politicians.

We shall sing their praises and extravagantly extol the virtues of the politicians, so that our group shall be contracted to perform during their campaign tours and celebration political victories.

Mrs. Jaja: In that case, we can reach out to the authorities through our songs. It will be a good avenue to highlight the needs of women. I see possibilities ... Our songs will become revolutionary tools in the hands of women to combat political and economic intimidation of women in this community...

Hajia Binta: Mrs Jaja, you have come again with your revolutionary ideas. We are not here to indict the leaders. We are here to incur their favours. Besides, who are these leaders you talk about? Is your husband not one of them? Is he not a chief in the King's palace? (Utoh, 32).

The women in Utoh's *Who Own's This Coffin?*, besides being women leaders of the dance group also hold leadership positions. One will expect that a large number of them having being on the receiving end of men dominance in the society will use their position wisely to empower fellow women and foster development. The reverse was the case. The playwright notes that,

It is disheartening to observe cracks on the walls of the women's movement, long before major huddles have been crossed and set goals accomplished. Periodic infighting and general dispiritedness among some of the women's organizations, has prompted keen observers to ask in perplexity; 'do militant liberationists speak only for themselves or for the silent majority too?' (Utoh,17).

Those who bear the brunt of oppression and dehumanization from the women in leadership positions are fellow women. These women who occupy leadership positions in the play, including the school principal are all found guilty of abuse of public office. Ojoniyi, Bode observes that:

For instance, in her first published major play, *Who Owns This Coffin?* we come across such an unequivocal message of how women are part of the major problem of women and the society at large. Just like what Tess Onwueme began in her play, *Go Tell It To Women*, where she shifts her attention to women as major players in women oppression, especially within classes of women, the play focuses on the rise of the new women, the educated women, who now use their education to renegotiate power and wealth for personal aggrandizement while equally oppressing and annihilating other women who challenge them to openness and accountability (14).

Materialism

Another cause for the failure of female friendship or subjugation is materialism. Putting forward personal objectives, caring for personal interest and not paying sufficient attention to the detriment of other women may be considered as materialism or selfishness. In Utoh's *Who owns this Coffin?* One would expect Madam Ekwutosi to understand her daughter but she chooses to satisfy her material desires, ego and selfish wants. This acid or cankerworm that destroys humans like metals has eaten deep into Madam Ekwutosi that her daughter has to be the sacrificial lamb for her to acquire more money and pay off her debt. She rejects Teddy a first class degree holder in engineering and chooses Colonel Liman her lover simply because Teddy does not have the prospects that matters to her. She sees Colonel Liman as a way out of her

desperate situation, thereby subjugating her daughter in order to achieve that wealth she desires.

Tracie Utoh in her play *Who Own's this Coffin?* Attempts to depict greed for power and greed for materialistic desire as factors or issues apart from culture that propels women to subjugate their fellow women. The popular axiom “onye oku na agba ulo ya adighi achu nta oke” is true of the cracks in the women world. Utoh seems to be saying that the problem women are facing is within them not only with patriarchy and until we are able to be sincere with our self only then can we successfully kill “the rat” (achieve equality with men). According to her; “women should greatly purge themselves of those vices which inhibit the very ideals we tenaciously uphold. Reject all corrupt and morally debasing practices. Never turn around to fight one another. Always uphold the dignity of womanhood. Strive to compete as equals not as subordinates willing to be satisfied with crumbs”(20). Through Mrs Sijuade she posits that self discipline, self determination, self confidence, self esteem, and self actualization are the true essence of women liberation.

In Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, Nneka, Ogwoma's mum and Ogoli, Uloko's mum choose to satisfy their materialistic desires and selfishness to the detriment of their children's joy. Nneka Ogwoma's mum destroyed her daughter's happiness because of their love for money. Ogwoma accuses her mother thus, “No, it is not the way others are given away to their husbands that you and father threw me away to Adigwu. No, mother, you and father were so hungry for money that you tied me like a goat and threw me away to a man I hated” (Sofola, 18).

On the other hand, Ogoli knows how much her son loves Ogwoma but what did she do? She did not as much look through the window or door to see if she was tied and carried to Adigwu or whipped and dragged to him. These she did simply because she does not want to lose her life in the hands of the all powerful and fearful Odibei. However, Sofola through Uloko exposes the fact

that women had the power to turn situations around. Yes it's true that in a typical society that men are the head, but women are the neck with which they cannot dispense. Sofola is of the opinion that Nneka, and Ogoli as the puppet master had the power to turn the direction of their puppets. The exposition goes thus:

Uloko: I did not say anything. You have been of no help as far as my marriage is concerned. It was in your presence that Ogwoma was forced from my hands and given away to Adigwu. Did you speak for me? Did you let Ibekwe know that an injustice was being done to you by his action? Did you let anyone know that, for money, the wife whom you had planned for your son was being forced from your hands and being given to someone else? Did you tell them that my life would be nothing if the one I love so much was given away to someone else? Did you?

Ogoli: Son, why must you...?

Uloko: Don't you know that, had you protested enough, Ibekwe would have sought another way to solve whatever problem he had at that time that made him force from my hands the only woman who was meant for me? (Sofola, 43).

Here, Sofola is saying that those conventions are man-made, they are reversible and that the alteration power is in the hands of the 'neck' -- women.

Sofola depicts the desperation of Odibei to subjugate Ogwoma through an intense dramatization of divination displayed in the play through deep diabolic and spiritual activity just to show the extent a woman can go in her quest to oppress and subjugate a fellow woman. This is evident in the following lines from the play.

Odibei: My God, the worse is done! Ogwoma walks on the path that reeks with blood. (*She picks up the snail shell and*

blows the powder). Let me feel your power! (*She puts it down, looks directly into the pot filled with smoke and speaks directly into it. She shakes the gourd at appropriate intervals*). The vulture does not see the corpse and resist it, the dog does not see human dung and resist it; the antelope does not hear its death music and refuse to dance; Ogwoma cannot hear your call and refuse to answer; bring her here! Lead her to me; bring her here not knowing what she is doing! Lead her and make her do whatever I bid! Ogwoma your soul is summoned! (*Ogwoma appears in a trance and walks towards Odibei*) Your soul is wanted; Come, come and not look back! Come and answer your call! Come and not look back. (Ogwoma reaches her and stops)

Ogwoma: (*Still in a trance; speaking slowly*) I am here!

Odibei: That is good. Go to your house, open the door and enter. Behind your water pot is another small pot. Open it and say into it once “I have done what the land forbids”, cup your hand and drink from the pot with your hand thrice saying before each, drink, “I have done what the land forbids”. Let me perish, “let my blood appease the disgraced spirit of my husband. Close the pot and wait for whatever comes. Is that clear?

Ogwoma: I will do everything (Sofola, 52)

The representation of the character of Odibei and Ogwoma by Sofola in this instance is a clear depiction of intra gender subjugation. Odibei was greedy with live, she lost her own life in her quest to make sure that a fellow woman suffers. This shows that women can be their worst enemies when it comes to subjugation and oppression of fellow women. She achieved her purpose but Uloko, Ogwoma’s lover avenged the death of his woman thus

falling on what Erich Fromm said that “greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction” (1).

Conclusion

This research has examined how creative writer’s portraits of feminist characters in Nigerian plays have ballooned to the creation of strong women characters whose conducts, in pursuit of gender equality, sometimes constitute a troubling challenge to other (marginal) female characters in the same text. Playwrights through characters recreates incidents and *imbued self consciousness or the psychological development of readers and audience, which in turn helps to mould and build a better society. This research having laid bare the issues militating against women thus urges women to stand up and speak up for themselves- for within them lies a great power of numerous POSSIBILITIES (They may or may not be aware of). According to Utoh-Ezeajugh “women have the capacity to become architects of their own destinies and decide whether to be included or excluded in the scheme of things” (150).*

The study concludes that the age long wish of women in terms of attaining emancipation and equity can be achieved only if they are true to themselves by paying attention to overlooked details. This can be achieved through the elimination/dismantling of oppressive cultural and patriarchal structures thereby achieving freedom from social inequality. By obtaining education and striving for financial freedom also, female empowerment can be achieved.

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