

**Engendering Women in Onwueme's Drama:
Then She Said It Discussed**



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Abstract

The corpus of Onwueme's plays highlights issues that impact on women. Her writings, like those of most other female writers, reify women as buffeted by all manner of repressive traditions, taboos and a myriad of other dos and don'ts. She also projects issues of the female quest for space within the Nigerian socio-political milieu. Furthermore, her plays interrogate issues that border on governance, morality and justice. In all these she deliberately constructs the woman as an indispensable partner in the quest for solutions besetting the society. Therefore, unlike the poor, hapless, vitiated pictures of the woman projected in previous Nigerian drama, she enlivens her female heroine, imbuing her with power hence her ability to contribute in moving the society. In this paper, we shall attempt an analysis of this female gendering within the Niger Delta crisis in Nigeria as discussed in her play *Then She Said It* and the role that women play in resolving the problem.

Introduction

Onwueme's theatrical *modus operandi* sets out to interrogate the place of the woman within the Nigerian socio-political milieu. Onwueme, herself, hails from the South-Eastern part of Nigeria where women have been traditionally known to have wielded some

measure of power, especially during the pre-colonial period. However, the coming of colonialism dis-empowered many of these women, making nonsense of their paraphernalia of power by downgrading such institutions or in some cases out rightly scrapping them (Kumah, <http://www.icaap.org/iiuicode?101.2.1.15>).

This happened because many colonial policies only "spread Western notions of domesticity, constricting the space available for women to participate in public life" (Adams,1) In discussing the status of women in pre-colonial and post colonial periods, Stratton also argues that:

Pre-colonial women had more freedom than their colonized descendents, male domination nonetheless an integral part of the societies they live in. Under Colonialism, African women were subject to interlocking forms of oppression: to the racism of Colonialism and to indigenous and foreign structures of male domination (Stratton, 7).

Probably this informs why Onwueme engenders her female characters with such power. Hers is a sort of re-creation of the ancient pictures of women in their power and glory; a shift from the "weak, choiceless, defeminized, invisible or incestuous" characterization that predominated earlier works of playwriting which were dominated by men. (Tobrise, 1) Onwueme like most female dramatists suggests that the older generation of playwrights were biased, stereotypical and not at all fair to women and womanhood generally. They maintain that most of the nascent plays were mere reflections of societal outlook on women; some sort of 'traditional sociology' in the sense that they merely capture pictures on ground (Gugelberger, vi).

Even Sofola, the first female playwright, has not being spared this tongue lashing. She has been severally accused of

projecting women negatively. Running through the gamut of her plays is the perpetual conflict of the old and the new 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 even when sometimes it appears to be static and unprogressive. Therefore, in many of her plays, any attempt made by women to break free from this stranglehold only met with a vicious backlash. Sofola fails to problematize tradition, choosing to reify it in its original, fixed putative state. In this sense many of her female characters come to a bad end. Ugwoma in *Wedlock of the gods* exemplify this ideology.

However, in Tess Onwueme's plays there is a paradigmatic shift from the dominant ethos. This is in the point of style, ideology and interpretation of trado-historical events and beliefs. Immanent in her plays is a spirit of rebellion. She deliberately objectifies her heroines to rebel against certain societal norms and beliefs. They are not awed by the voice of the majority. They strenuously strive to actualize their goals and in most cases tramples over these coercive and unprogressive instruments of persecution. The courage of women is therefore a central point of focus in the play *Then She Said It*.

Onwueme's Thematic Pre-occupation/Ideology

The ideology of Onwueme can best be understood by the study of the larger Nigerian society where she draws most of her inspiration. Fundamentally, the world of her plays is populated by more women characters. However, she does not only write about women,

though it can be argued that they form a substantial number of her major characters. She, however, writes on other wide ranging issues that touch on the socio-political and economic make up of Nigeria. Hers is a departure from the mytho-poetic and magical world of Sofola and other earlier playwrights with their attendant constrictive atmosphere, the heroes of whom are "helpless victims of fate" who could not save themselves. (Gbilekaa, 1) She is a crusader of social justice and a humanist. Her plays comment on contemporary issues that touch on Nigeria, Africa and the larger world as a whole.

Overall, therefore Onwueme in most of her plays pitches tradition and modernity. In most cases, tradition always triumphs. In *Tell it to Women*, tradition is symbolized with the village *XXada*. The city women represented modernity. In this case, she shows modernity as decadent, retrogressive inasmuch as it minimizes the noble traditions of the people which teach respect and level headedness. This is an obvious criticism of Western style feminism whether in the guise of lesbian or radical feminism. Contextually, in *A Hen Too Soon*, the death of Cortuma is symbolically interpreted to mean the death of tradition which he represents and the victory of modernity which Qna represents (Amuta, 55).

Onwueme is an erudite international scholar and well published. Among her many works are *A Hen too soon* (1983) *The Broken Calabash* (1984) *The Desert Encroaches* (1985) *A Scent of Onions* (1986) *Mirror for Campus* (1987) *Ban Empty Barn* and other Plays (1986) *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988) *Legacies* (1989) *Riot in Heaven* (1991) *Tell it to Women* (1992) *Shakara Dance Hall Queen* (2000) *The Missing Face* (2002) *Then She Said It* (2002).

All the above plays discuss on a wide ranging issues that are topical, sensitive and a challenge to nationhood whether at the microcosmic level of family like in *A Hen Too Soon* and *The Broken*

Calabash which basically dramatizes family tensions underlining the theme of the so much bandied tradition versus modernity theme. Both Gladys and Qna fight strenuously against archaic patriarchal expectations resulting to some of the unpleasanties and taboos committed. Or her commentary on global politics in *The Desert Encroaches*, where she sues for peace using an allegorical situation. The same ideology permeates *Ban Empty Barn* another allegorical play deployed by Onwueme to comment on very serious national issues that border on mis-government, religious intolerance, food security and other such germane 'hot potato' issues.

In *The Reign of Wazobia*, she uses Wazobia, a female character, to launch an acid attack against dictatorship and the sit-tight syndrome of many African leaders. Other plays like *Cattle Egret Versus Nama*, *The Artist's Homecoming*, *Shakara Dance Hall* dramatizes the enduring legacy of corruption, abuse of power and the blatant disregard for the rule of law ironically by the law enforcement agents themselves, the ambitious call for the redistribution of wealth and exploitation of the less privileged respectively. *Missing Face* and *Legacies* all discuss the quest by a family to trace their roots to Nigeria. *Tell it to Women* is a critique of intra gender exploitation, haughtiness insensitivity and downright snobbishness of so called progressive women, who see themselves as champions of women issues but who demonstrate a condescending attitude towards the same people they are supposed to be helping to emancipate. It is also an attempt to "refocus on the feminist ideology and its relevance within an African community" (Evwierhoma, 27).

Probably that is why most of Onwueme's plays are anchored on the Womanist ideology. This ideological underpinning, which celebrates the virtues of women, is quite evident in many of the characters of her fictional world. She creates

vivid pictures of women and deliberately re-invents their status. She achieves this by deliberately removing the inhibitive structures on the way which impedes the women's progress or which give them a negative image. The flat characterization of women in earlier Nigerian plays is radically reversed by Onwueme given that these sloppy, incoherent and pliable female characters are now replaced with composed, directed and purpose driven heroines who are not hampered by authorial construction to realize their potentials.

Gladys in *A Hen Too Soon*, Qna in *The Broken Calabash*, Rufina in *The Artist's Homecoming*, the Xada in *Tell it to Women*, Wazobia in *The Reign of Wazobia*. All exemplify this ideology. She however does not unnecessarily overstretch the situation in the sense of projecting them all as saints as some female playwrights are wont to do. She highlights the good, the bad, and the ugly side of women; a sort of holistic and realistic portrayal of them (Jeremiah, 16).

Engendering Women in *Then She Said It*

Then She Said It is set in the oil rich Niger Delta. The environmental degradation and misuse of the eco system by oil companies deals a heavy blow on the economic activities of the people living there. As a result of this, they are reduced to the beggarly status of scrounging for jobs with these oil companies. Their farms can no more yield any harvest because the soil has been affected by oil pollution. The rivers are also not yielding any harvest of fish given that most of the waters have been poisoned by this same chemical pollution as a result of careless and indiscriminate oil spillage. They do not have clean drinking water. The dialogue between Obida and Niger captures this sorry state of affairs,

Obida: They've killed everything with their pollution and oil spillage. We cannot breathe clean air. Fish die or get fried

in the simmering rivers. Water-water everywhere. But we have no clean water to drink! And now we have no land too?

Niger: No firewood because the plants and trees are soaked in oil. What do they expect us to cook with? (15)

Onwueme use the names of rivers to represent characters in her play. Contextually, Oji will indicate the South-Eastern Ibo Speaking area; Oshun symbolizes the Western axis of Nigeria Kainji, the Middle belt; River Benue, the Northern region of Nigeria. The selection of national formations cutting across the gamut of Nigeria signifies the national outlook of the problem in question. Atlantic, an apt signification of the Western industrialized nations as represented by the oil corporations in concert with the local leadership are purveyors of nothing but suffering.

The role of traditional rulers typified with Ethiope who also collude with these agencies of exploitation is discussed. The playwright indicts these royal personages showing them to be part of the problem even when they are supposed to be protectors of the people. The issue of oil, a very contentious and lightly emotional issue within Nigerian political arena, oil pollution and environmental degradation all come to play a significant role in this thought provoking play.

The play is a celebration of the courage and resilience of a people as they revolt against tyranny and oppression of their leaders. It is an argument that the collective will of the people cannot be silenced no matter the level of intimidation. It is also a warning that there is a level to which people can be suppressed. The apocalyptic vision of this play captures the present reality of the Niger Delta problem. The play, itself, was written about ten years ago yet the playwright was able to foresee the deteriorating situation that has become so much a centre of attention. Even

though the Niger-Delta problem has been around for some time, the degree of deterioration has intensified over time, yet, a careful reading of the play will give the suggestion that it has just been written because of the realistic portrayal of nascent events.

Even though *Then She Said It* is located in the Niger Delta, the message of the play can be universalized as it captures the difficult situation that many Nigerians are faced with, what with high unemployment, exploitation in its multifaceted colourations, tribalism and a general lack of direction from the political class who have colluded with foreign investors to keep the people in a pauperized state. The jostling and hustling for survival breed discontent. Many young people are forced into compromising situations that ordinarily they will not partake of. Many of the young boys in Nigeria, frustrated by the situation they have found themselves, resort to kidnapping, armed robbery and engaging in other unwholesome acts. As inexcusable as these acts may be, they are a true reflection of the vexatious situation occasioned by the injustices and insensitivity of the political class. Characters in the play like Koko, Obida and Oshun- young girls- who are forced to go into prostitution and engage in other menial acts to keep body and soul together point to this sorry situation that the country has been plunged into.

It is also worth noting the age range of most of the heroes in this play. It is a deliberate authorial making that most of them are young. A look at the militants in the Niger Delta crisis and indeed many of the other flash points in Nigeria indicates that many of them fall within this age range. This should be a great cause for concern for the authorities. The youth are getting restive. The playwright seems to suggest that the sooner government tackles issues affecting these restless minds the better for everybody. How true her predictions have come to pass. The escalation of the Niger Delta crisis and the general deterioration of security in Nigeria

attests to this opinion expressed about ten years ago but which has slowly but insidiously escalated presently. Kidnappings, pipeline vandalization and other economic crimes have since become common place in Nigeria.

The play opens in an atmosphere of frenzy and chaos. Probably a suggestion of the trying times in Hungeria- a metaphor for Nigeria. The military are on rampage, killing and maiming people in a commando style reminiscent of the brutish and repressive attitude of many African leaders who will rather roll out tanks against poor defenceless people instead of rolling out development plans for their betterment. These rampaging armies of destruction most at time find their easy prey on women and children because of their vulnerability in times of hostilities. Consequently, they run for cover; cowering in fear and confusion. In the ensuing melee, many of them get killed, raped or brutalized one way or the other.

Onwueme, however, does not signify women *Then She Said It* as such. Rather, she imbues them with an intrepid spirit and a resolve to meet these forces of oppression headlong. This courage helps to propel the struggle forward, galvanizing the mass populace and rousing them from the state of inertia and fatalism.

Two Voices (*Frightened*): Oh no...Not again. They'll kill...

Another Young Woman (*Fiercely*): Yes, let them. We are down on the ground already. So what else can they do? (2)

Women therefore play a pivotal role in the struggle against the forces of oppression in *Then She Said It*, Onwueme establishes this right from the start of the play.

It should be noted that the effort to free Hungeria is

championed by women and the youth. This is a great indictment of the older generation who have been projected as colluding on the opposite side with multinational companies to keep the people perpetually enslaved and emasculated. Instead of populating the play with the usual titanic male heroes engaged in daring adventures, a characteristic of most plays of the earlier generation, the revolt against oppressive powers in *Then She Said It* is masterminded by women.

The stentorian voices of dissent by these women run through the gamut of the play. They are not passive but actively plan and strategize with the youth as to how to address the terrible situation people in Hungeria have found themselves in. In Movement Three a typical situation attendant in Hungeria is revealed. That there are long queues in petrol stations is not strange in Hungeria. The point of emphasis by the playwright probably rests in the role women play within this dispensation. This is demonstrated by even the stage direction in the beginning of the Movement.

(Obida pushes her way through the chaotic line, goes over, pumps and plays with the empty fuel hose. A male voice shouts "Yes sistah. Pump am! Pump am well-well! I dey your side") (14).

While the men remain in the sidelines unable to initiate any cause of action, women summon the courage to protest. They do not grovel at the feet of the petrol attendant who attempts to intimidate them. Fearlessly, they denounce him and when he threatens to whip Obida, they resist this by forming a human shield around her. His belligerence fails to frighten the women. Instead they succeed in discovering where the petrol is and initiated the process of pumping it.

Even the entrance of the police officer in the scene does not silence them. There is confusion once again. In the ensuing melee, Obida, in her youthful exuberance grabs the policeman's gun and would have used it against him but for the calm intervention of Niger who warns that too much blood has already been spilled. In her revolutionary zeal, Obida urges the women to free themselves from the clutches of servitude. Police are called in and in their usual predictable fashion, use excessive force and brutality to disperse the crowd.

Obida, who has clearly demonstrated her leadership qualities, is however undaunted. In spite of the clash she has with the police earlier on, the next time we see her, she is organizing the women and youth to protest in front of the GRA/Oil club.

Oshun, the mistress of Atlantic forced into that life because of circumstances of unemployment also plays a pivotal role in the struggle against exploitation. She manipulates Atlantic and gets her boyfriend a job with the oil company. She does this to be able to keep tabs on Atlantic. In spite of her disadvantaged status, she never hesitates to confront Atlantic and remind him of his brutality on her people.

The confrontation between Oshun and Atlantic can be understood in two levels. Firstly, the exploitation of young girls like her by the rich and powerful foreigners who flaunt money to trap them into sexual relationships.

However, it can also be viewed as a symbolic representation of the exploiter and exploited. Atlantic represents the powerful foreign investors while Oshun represents the exploited people of Hungeria who have been rendered powerless in their own country.

It should be understood that Onwueme is not encouraging

prostitution. She however, realistically captures the desperate situation that young girls like Oshun are subjected to. After graduating many of them are unable to secure jobs. They are forced into unwholesome trade to be able to keep body and soul together. Young girls like Oshun in frustration are willing to sell themselves off, a direct indictment of the society by the playwright where hard work does not necessarily pay.

Oshun like Obida is not the usual run- of- the mill, pliable female characters. She is a hard nut to crack; ferocious and courageous. She is not cowed by Atlantic in spite of his elevated status. She sees herself as an equal to him and so does not grovel at his feet. On the occasion that she talks to him with subservience, it is only to give him a false sense of superiority. She reminds him that she is as much qualified as him educationally.

Oshun: (*Takes out a scroll of paper from her back*) Look I have my degree.

Atlantic: (*Startled, jumps*) A what?

Oshun: I said diplomas!

Atlantic: What? You kidding! Can't...can't be right (53).

All along, Atlantic thought he has been consorting with a cheap uneducated girl out to make money. He failed to see the devastation that his conspiracy with the local officials was doing to the people which has resulted in many girls like Oshun to be where they are. Oshun reminded him as much.

Oshun...Like you too, I have earned them. Earned them. And many others like me in this land...with lots of degrees! But see where are we now? Where? You have the upper

hand because your country lifts you up and mine abandons, forsakes and betrays me...all of us...with you in control...(53).

The power that Onwueme invests on women is greatly reversed in the case of men. In other to shore up the image of women, she deliberately minimizes the power of men. Given that they are powerful in the sense that they control the socio-political and economic spheres of the Hungerian society. She, however, disempowers them in the sense that they lack the ability to control the people. Also, even though the law enforcement agencies are directly answerable to them, they end up helpless in the face of people power that the women are able to muster. And so, we see them cringing in fear at the sound of any disturbance. They have completely lost control. The people do not listen to them anymore.

Kainji: They will listen to you better

Ethiope: These women and youth to listen? To whom?

Atlantic and Kainji: You their beloved chief

Ethiope: You must be joking or simply you are blind to their nature. Even the deaf and the blind can tell you that the voices you hear out their today's women and youth are no longer what they used to be (57).

Or even among the oppressed people themselves in their struggle to free themselves of oppression, the women were stronger and more daring. At a point, the women heckled the men challenging them to go and fight the oppressors instead intimidating them.

Women: Ohoo! They like to shut us up. Go and shut the oil wells.

Woman: With your so called power, what can you do to the white man?

Women: Go fight them now. Fight the oil club! Fight! Fight them. Fight them who are against us (60).

During a demonstration, the police are called in who start shooting indiscriminately. However, while people flee in different directions, the voice of Obida could be heard rallying them round, defiantly denouncing oppression and promising to retaliate. She shouts "we will retaliate!" and the chorus comprising of women shouts in unison, "Oh yes we will" (67).

Movement Nine presents a very powerful moving scene where the women incensed by the brutality of the government now organize themselves in fury and overrun the GRA/OIL club. Even though they are met with police superior fire power, this did not deter them in any way. In a true spirit of heroism, the women march on gallantly to the GRA/OIL club. In spite of the disproportionate use of force by the law enforcement agents the women were able to kidnap Atlantic but the sheer force of the police overwhelm them. Many of them are arrested. In the international court, however, they are acquitted of any wrong doing. The gallantry of this motley crowd of women yields great results as they succeed in bringing to justice the plunderers of their country.

Conclusion

In *Then She Said It*, Onwueme consciously set out to reverse the roles of women. Like most of her other plays, she engenders women with power, imbuing them with the paraphernalia of authority to participate in shaping their society and not just peep from the rear as is the case elsewhere. She suggests that women should not be constructed as such weak, pliable creatures incapable of a will of

their own. The heroic feat and daring spirit of Oshun, Obida, Koko and other women in the play exemplify a spirit of courage that is not only found in men. Indeed, in this particular case, men had even failed to address the rotten situation. Women take it upon themselves to challenge the injustice.

A cursory look at the Nigerian political landscape indicates that in many organizations where women have headed, a greater measure of discipline and cohesion has been attained. Consequently successes in those organizations have been robust. *Then She Said It* is therefore a kind of parable to the mostly patriarchal society of Nigeria to appreciate the indispensability of women in its effort to move the country forward and to achieve a greater measure of social, political and economic transformation.

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