

ARTICULATION OF WOMEN AND GENDER ISSUES IN
DRAMA AND THEATRE FROM CLASSICAL GREECE
TO POST INDEPENDENCE NIGERIA

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Introduction

Dramatists utilize a variety of subject matters for their artistic creations; These range from politics, religion, societal norms and values, current affairs and gender issues. Women and gender issues have been used as a subject matter for dramatic creations from time immemorial. In the Greek theatre of the 5thC BC, women and gender issues were clearly articulated in the drama of this era. Even though the theatre of this period seriously discriminated against women, the Greek dramatists never failed to articulate women and gender issues in their works as evident in Aristophanes Lysistrata and Euripides's Medea. These plays presented the problems confronting women of their generation in clear perspectives as will be seen in the later part of this discourse.

This paper is divided into many segments. Other than the introduction, we have another segment on conceptual clarifications after which there is yet another on variations of feminism, another on gender issues from the beginning of drama in Greece to the 19th century. The last is the identification of gender issues that are prevalent in Africa and Nigeria and how various dramatists have utilized them as source materials

for artistic creation.

Conceptual Clarifications

In this paper, attempts will be made to survey the definitions of certain concepts and operational definitions of such concepts will also be provided in order to ease the understanding of the issues in dispute. The concepts that have been selected for explanation here include gender, gender issues, feminism, womanism, black feminism and motherism.

Gender: this is a social construct that has recently attracted the attention of many scholars especially in the social sciences. In the words of Idyorough (2005:1):

Ordinarily, gender is an English word for classifying nouns into male, female and neuter. However, its present usage specifically refers to the relation between male and female in terms of roles such that certain roles are seen as exclusively females and others males. It refers to the social differentiation between males, females and the attribution of certain roles on the basis of that differentiation.

It is in a similar direction that Bulus and Udo (2004:240) also define it as:

... the social differences and relations between men and women which are learned, changeable over time and have wide variation both within and between cultures of any given society.

These definitions point to the fact that gender roles change and are not biologically ascribed and are equally not universally applicable but differ from time to time and place to place or

from one culture to another.

Tahir (2004:1) adds another dimension to it when he defines it as:

...a social construct that establishes and differentiates status and role between men and women, particularly in the way they contribute to, participate in and are rewarded by the economy and the prevailing social system.

In Tahir's view, this role differentiation between the sexes is determined by the economy and the prevailing social system but not by nature as often misconstrued by most men. It is also in a similar direction that Ahule (2007:201) also considers it to be:

... the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, our society and our cultures and passed down to generations through socialization.

This means that gender does not have any natural connotation associated with it but rather focuses on social relations between males and females. In this direction, one will be right to observe that the discrimination, segregation, subjugation and suppression of women in most human societies is not natural but manmade. Nature has differentiated these sexes only in biological perspectives i.e. male and female and has endowed them with the ability to procreate. All other social differentiations of roles identified with either man or woman have been socially ascribed, prescribed and embedded into the social and cultural system to favour the male dominated society (Ahule 2007:202). This segregation against women has

continued because men have for a very long time enjoyed this culture of dominance and would not want to lose this dominant position.

In this study however, we shall consider gender to be those social tasks that are learned and assigned based on sexes and which differ from one culture to the other. Okoh (2008:92) believes that these are assigned and enforced through various means such as socialization in childhood, family, religious, educational and political institutions. For instance, that a woman has to cook is socially and culturally determined but not naturally. Also that, women should not preach before a congregation of men and women is equally socially, culturally and religiously determined. This is because elsewhere, both men and women cook and both men and women also preach before mixed congregations.

Closely related to gender is the concept of gender issue which Idyorough (2005:3) describes as arising:

.... Where an instance of gender inequality is identified and recognized as undesirable or unjust and that something should be done to resolve the problem. A gender issue becomes manifest where there is discrimination and oppression against a particular sex leading to a gender inequality.

It follows therefore that discrimination against women in all its ramifications constitutes a gender issue and as such steps should be taken to address it in order to have a society where all the sexes operate on the same plane with one another to bring about harmony and development. Consequent upon the

above, this study therefore considers gender issues to be all kinds of feelings, actions and speeches that are intended to suppress, intimidate, subjugate and discriminate against women and place them at a disadvantage before their male counterparts.

Feminism on the other hand is derived from the Latin word 'Femina' meaning women. According to the <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/feminism>, "Feminism is a collection of movements aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for women". We shall consider it here to be a means of empowering, attaining self actualization and self reclamation of the women in a male dominated world. In the words of Asen (2006:168):

The women liberation movement gave birth to feminism. This movement emerged during the late 1960s primarily in America. It was partly triggered by the radical movements of middle and late 1960s, the black power movement and peace movement. These movements gave women an opportunity to begin their own struggle for human rights.

The efforts of women like Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet etc are commendable. These and many others contributed greatly to the growth and development of the feminist movement in their writings in no small measure.

Feminism has been divided into stages or rather waves. The first was during the 19th and 20th centuries in United Kingdom and United States of America. Initially it focused on

the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women. However by the end of the 19th century, emphasis shifted to political power and rights. As such, feminism also changed its point of emphasis and concentrated on fighting to gain women suffrage.

The second wave set in between 1966 and 1980 and was a continuation of the first but it concentrated more on issues of equality and thus, tried to fight and end discrimination. It was however concerned more with the problems of upper class women.

The third wave or stage started in the early 1990s and it came about as a response to the failures of the second wave. It actually challenged the second wave's overemphasis on the experiences of upper class white women and equally sought to negotiate for space within feminist thought for consideration of race related subjectivities.

The feminist movement has actually impacted positively on the western society. As a matter of fact, it has been able to bring about women suffrage. It has also won for women the right to initiate divorce proceedings, it has also granted women the right to make individual decisions on pregnancy and abortion. On the economic front, it has also won for women the right to enter into contracts and also own property. They equally advocated and got workspace rights such as maternity leave and have also sought against most forms of discriminations against women. The movement apart from all these has also tried to protect women and girls against much domestic violence, sexual harassment and sexual assault.

There are different kinds of feminism which include

radical feminism, cultural feminism, socialist feminism, Marxist feminism and religious feminism which is further subdivided into Christian, Jewish and Islamic feminisms.

Variations of Feminism

Feminism has a lot of variations and the choice of which is to be used is determined by the cultural and social background of the people concerned. It is variously referred to as feminism, femalism, womanism, motherism, black feminism and humanism (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2010:8). In all these, the emphasis is on how to curtail the suppression of women. In as much as all the above mentioned aim at eradicating all forms of discriminations against women, their approaches differ from one another. To many, the concept of feminism appears to be too Western and radical and as such does not suit the African soil and culture. In view of this, other terms that are broader and more subtle have been sought to describe the fight against women discrimination in Africa and other minor races of the World. Arguing in this direction, Utoh-Ezeajugh (2010:8) maintains that:

It is rather obvious that social and cultural factors have rendered Western feminism inappropriate and ineffective in solving problems of gender discrimination in the African social sphere. Concepts which are more culture-specific and address the woman issue from a relatively African perspective are womanism, black feminism and motherism.

Womanism

According to an electronic source <http://www.ouedu/women.soc/feminism-womanism:htm>, womanism is simply:

Having or expressing a belief in or respect for women and their talents and abilities beyond the boundaries of race and class: exhibiting a feminism that is inclusive especially of black American culture.

Womanism and black feminism are used interchangeably for they overlap a lot. In the view of another electronic source <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/womanism>:, The word womanism was adopted from pullitzer prize winning author Alice Walkers use of the term in her book *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. She used the word to describe the perspective and experiences of "women of color". It emerged out of the feeling that feminism was more concerned about the emancipation of white women especially those of the upper class. As such, women of other races and low socio-economic status were not carried along by feminism. Womanism came in to cater for these categories such as women of other colours and races and women of low income status. It is in supporting this claim that Utoh-Ezeajugh (2010:8) asserts that:

Womanism posturing aims to address the woman question from the African point of view. It seeks to relieve the everyday lives and situations of African women under the shackles of cultural inhibitions and social conventions.

As a movement, womanism in nature is subtle and is not as radical as feminism. It actually seeks a mutual co-operation between all the races and sexes. In supporting this claim, Asen (2006:173) in her analysis of walkers' second definition of womanism asserts that:

...womanism presents a vision where the women and men of different colors coexist like flowers in a garden yet attain their black cultural distinctness and integrity. Here a black girl asks the mother why they are the mother why they are brown, pink, and yellow and their cousins are white, beige and black. The response is that the colored race is just like a flower garden where every flower's color is represented.

The hallmark of womanism is that it seeks mutual cooperation between the sexes and races in order to make life more meaningful for the woman.

Another variation of feminism is motherism. This shares similar values and traits with womanism. Both utilize tolerance, mutual cooperation, love and service in their approaches. As mentioned earlier, these two are more subtle and gentle and embrace women of all races and socio-economic classes than feminism and they seem to suit the African soil and culture better than feminism which is more inclined to the west. It is believed to be Africa's alternative to feminism and it denotes motherhood. It has been propounded by Catherine Obianuju Acholonu and it emphasizes that African women are the spiritual base of every family, community and nation. It emphasizes love, tolerance, service and mutual cooperation of the sexes. The motherist writer is not a sexist and as such does not create his works from a patriarchal, masculinist and dominatory perspective. He does not present himself as an arrogant, all knowing self-righteous person. Achebe (1985) in *African Short Stories II* suggests that women are represented as incarnations of the last hope for the restoration of the natural order in life and in every sphere of life. He argues further that the colonized African soil that has

been totally dominated by men is coloured by wars, civil strife, hunger, famine, tyranny and genocide. He then advocates for a return to the mother essence or rather women and motherist leaders. Motherism sees women essentially as mothers who tender their children, show them love and care for them generally.

The last of these variations is black feminism which Utoh-Ezeajugh (2010:9) describes as:

...the struggle of a subjugated group within a minority group to be heard. Black feminist thought emerged from the writings and discourse of a burgeoning community of black feminist intellectuals...it represents a collective socio-political consciousness that emerged from the shared standpoints and collective lived experiences of black women.

This variety has provided a black woman's analysis or discourse about black women's oppression in an unjust society. Even though closely related to one another, womanism and black feminism still differ in some ways. Like feminism, black feminism seems to be more confrontational than womanism and motherism.

Identifying Gender Issues

Gender issues are found in large quantities in virtually all human societies and these have provided source materials for artists from time immemorial. One thing to note is the fact that in as much as these gender issues seem universal, many still differ from society to society and culture to culture.

The most common gender issues however include rape,

sexism, role stereotyping, regarding women as property that can be exchanged for money, bareness, child marriage, female genital mutilation, lesbianism etc. In Nigeria, Idyorough (2005:51-57) identifies the following as the most prevailing gender issues. These include: Female genital mutilation, harmful delivery practices, food taboos, child marriage, child prostitution, child labour, childhood stratification, child preference, unequal access to education, unequal access to health, unequal access to inheritance, widowhood practices, female seclusion and exclusion, reproductive health rights, sex negotiation and sexual violence. All these and many more have provided dramatists with inspirations with which they have created several plays as will be seen shortly.

Gender Issues in Drama and Theatre from Classical Greece to the 19th Century Europe and America.

As earlier stated, gender issues have been used extensively as source materials for dramatic creations from the beginning to the present. In Europe and America, the major gender issues border on discrimination, ownership of property, rape, polygamy, divorce, sexual abuse and assault, women in prison, battered women, domestic violence, submitting to the whims and caprices of the husband and as such remaining quiet in whatever situation and so on.

In as much as drama and theatre at the beginning discriminated against women, the disadvantaged position of the woman was of paramount interest to dramatists. This is true because a journey in to the beginning of drama and theater in Greece in the 5th Century BC reveals that women were not allowed to write, direct or act plays on the Greek

stage. Even though feminine roles were found in Greek plays, they were acted out by men who wore feminine masks. This notwithstanding, women and gender issues attracted the attention of several dramatists of this era. It is in supporting this position that Jacobus (1997:216) in describing Euripedes's tragedies when he observes that: "the suffering of women had been a major theme in the tragedies of Euripedes". He actually deviated from his predecessors and contemporaries who were more concerned about the relationship between men and the gods. He focused more on the relationship of men with fellow men. Commenting on this break away, Jacobus (1997:183) submits further that Euripedes:

...broke away from the formality of language and theme of his predecessors. Euripedes is especially noted for shifting the focus of dramatic events from gods to humans...one aspect of his dramatic critique of Greek culture was an unusual emphasis on women.

For daring to write about women liberation in an era and society where women were rated slightly above slaves and below boys, Euripedes was actually a deviant. In *Medea*, Euripedes explores the theme of polygamy and betrayal as seen in the character of *Medea* who has been betrayed by her husband Jason. In spite of her love for her husband, Jason still goes ahead and marries a younger wife, Glauke, a princess of Corinth. Jason feels that this marriage will enhance the security of his family. *Medea* avenges this betrayal by killing her husband, the second wife and her father, the King of Corinth as well as her two children.

Another theme articulated in the Greek drama of this time was that of physical and psychological torture of women.

This theme is dramatized in Aristophanes *Lysistrata* in which women strategize to stop men from engaging in unwarranted wars. The end result of these wars is domestic violence against women for their men (husbands and sons) abandon them for years and some do not return alive. Others who return are burdens to their families because they come back maimed and as such can no longer fend for their families. While alone at home, these abandoned women go through some mental, emotional, psychological and physical torture. An end to these wars means a relief for the women so they succeed in convincing their men to stop these wars and at the end of the play both husbands and wives leave happily to go home with a resolve to stop the wars and respect one another.

The European society of the 19th and early 20th centuries considered a woman's responsibility as trying to satisfy her husband in whatever situation without questioning. As such, women were regarded as their husband's properties. It is in supporting this allusion that Jacobus (1997:635) makes the following comment of Nora's character in Ibsen's *A Doll House* that "Nora is portrayed as a macaroon-eating, sweet toothed creature looking for ways to please her husband". It is this theme of docility and total submission to the will of the husband by the European women that is also dramatized in Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Ibsen in this play is of the opinion that the docility of the European women has caused more harm to the society. In the play, Mr. Alving and his son are infected with syphilis. The entire Alving family is doomed for the son becomes insane as a result of the infection and the two daughters all end up in a brothel. All these have come about

because of the wife's docility for society does not permit her to act according to the dictates of her conscience. If she were allowed to divorce as she wished, all these would not have come to pass. It is based on the predicament of the European woman of this time and the danger the society would be exposed to if this trend were not checked that Ibsen in his notes for the modern tragedy as reproduced by Jacobus (1997:711) laments that:

A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day which is an exclusively masculine society with laws framed by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view.

About Nora's character in *A Doll House*, Ibsen maintains that:

She has committed forgery and is proud of it, for she did it out of love for her husband, to save his life. But this husband with his common place principles of honour is on the side of the law and looks at the question from a masculine point of view.

Unfortunately, the European society did not take it kindly with Ibsen for creating plays that were aimed at liberating women. So many criticisms were leveled against him and one of these is found in American Encyclopedia Vol. 14 (2004:695) which interprets the play to be: "... a shockingly immoral attack on the sanctity of marriage and obscene denial of a wife's primary duty to her husband and children". To conservatives, Ibsen's plays were a total deviation from all moral standards. All these criticisms coupled with what women were going through in 19th century Europe compelled Ibsen to lament about the prospects and future of the European women and society generally in the following words:

These modern, ill used as daughters, as wives not educated according to their gifts prevented from following their calling, deprived of their inheritance, embittered in temper it is these who furnish the mothers of the new generations, what will be the results?

It is rather disheartening to note that the discrimination against women in the society equally translated into the theatre. European and American women for a very long time were not deeply involved in the more serious arts of the theatre like playwriting and directing until much later. It will not be out of place to say that the patriarchal nature of these societies was responsible for this. As a result, women and gender related issues were articulated in drama and theatre by male sympathizers and even such received widespread criticisms as mentioned earlier. In the words of Cohen (1994:286); "women.... Were utterly unrepresented in the theatre until the 17th century and who from then until 1950s have been largely relegated to acting and costume construction". This situation grossly affected the level of theatrical output by women. It was as late as the 1950s that three different American women playwrights-Beth Henley, Marsha Norman and Wendy Wasserstein won Pulitzer prizes for playwriting. In England too, several women playwrights such as Jane Wagner, Tina Howe and Caryl Churchill made significant contributions in playwriting. During this period too, several women became artistic directors in many New York theatres. Of equal importance was the formation in 1970 of separate feminist theatre groups. Over a hundred of such sprang up in the

United States. Their major preoccupation was the presentation of plays by, about and for women. This encouraged several women to start writing plays whose major themes were centered around sex role stereotyping, abortion, pregnancy, rape, motherhood, lesbianism, domestic violence, historically important women, battered women and women in prison (Cohen, 1994:288). These feminist plays were created by women who suffered and had the first hand experience of the discrimination and torture in the male dominated society. Commenting on the content of feminist drama, Natalie (1985:21) opines that:

The content of all feminist drama comes out of the personal lives of the theatre group members. Feminist groups write their own drama and the reality they depict comes from their own experience...not only of the actors but of the audience as well. In feminist drama the audience is more than just a passive body viewing the action on the stage...audience members [play] an active role in the creation of a total theatre experience.

It was only when these feminist drama groups sprang up that conscious efforts were made by women to create plays about their predicaments. In as much as earlier male playwrights had created plays with feminist undertones, such did not reflect the true experiences of women since they were created by men who merely observed but never faced such dehumanizing situations themselves.

Gender Issues in African and Nigerian Drama

In Africa, culture and tradition affect gender relations in no small measure. Most of the gender issues in contention in

African societies are anchored on the culture of the various societies where they prevail. As earlier mentioned some of the most prevalent gender issues include barrenness and sterility, female genital mutilation, male child preference, child marriage, child prostitution, child labour, trading in female children, widowhood practices, female seclusion and exclusion, unequal access to inheritance, sexual abuse and assault, rape, polygamy, semantic derogation of women etc. All these and many others have provided source materials for the creation of many plays by African and Nigerian dramatists. We shall now attempt an analysis of how these have been utilized by different playwrights in their plays.

The ability to procreate is not one person's responsibility. However in most African cultures, barrenness and sterility in most families is blamed on the woman. It is possible that in some of the instances, men could be at fault. This is because some sicknesses like low sperm count, genetic abnormalities, chronic sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis, gonorrhoea etc could result in a man's inability to impregnate a woman. When a family faces this problem however, it is always the wife that is blamed. It is a similar situation that is dramatized by Aidoo in *Anowa* where we see Anowa married to Kofi Ako and for a very long time they are without an issue. Kofi Ako then opts for a divorce since Anowa has not been able to give him an issue. He says in the play that:

Kofi Ako: ... and you can't give me the only thing I want from you, a child. Let us part, Anowa (56).

In the play too, even though it has been rumoured that Kofi Ako used his manhood to acquire wealth and prosperity and

also that he was born sickly and weak as such cannot impregnate a woman, he holds the wife responsible for the family's predicament. Anowa dies at the end probably because she cannot stand the shame of being divorced. The theme of barrenness and childlessness was a cause of concern for most African female dramatists at the early stage of Africa's literary experience to an extent that male writers rather than support their female counterparts so as to save marriages resorted to criticizing them of over dwelling on this theme as retorted by Nwapa (2008:531) that:

African women writers have been accused of dwelling too much on barrenness. They are told by male critics to write on "more important" themes.

In defence of her colleagues, Nwapa (2008:531) posits that:

...the problem that a woman faces in the world is the pain of not being able to bring forth a child from her womb...A wife is more often than not betrayed and abandoned by her husband if she does not have a child. Therefore, the desire to be pregnant, to procreate is an overpowering one in the life of the woman. She is ready to do anything to have a child.

Closely related to the issue of childlessness is the issue of male child preference. In most parts of Africa, the male child is preferred to the female one. Africans believe that the male child continues with the family name long after the parents are dead. For the girl child however, once she marries, she loses the family name and adopts the name of the husband's family. The male child is also expected to inherit all that the father would leave behind. When one marries and is not able to get someone who would inherit his assets and continue with the family name, one is not usually happy and does not all one can

to get one. This picture is succinctly painted by Okoh (2002:63) when she opines that:

Discrimination against women in African societies including Nigeria starts from the day the female infants step into the world...sons enjoy greater importance than daughters because they are the only ones that can perpetuate lineage, ...parents who do not have male offspring feel unfulfilled and would go extra length to ensure that they have one, the arrival of the female child is welcomed with mixed feelings by disappointed parents who would have preferred having a male child.

This gender issue is also dramatized by Zulu Sofola in *Wedlock of the Gods* and Anuli Ausbeth-Ajagu's *Nwanyibuiife*. In Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, Ogwoma is compelled to marry someone she does not love in order to raise money to treat her sick brother. The happiness of the girl is sacrificed on the altar of the male child's survival. In *Nwanyibuiife*, the heroine in the play has a curse on her head even before her birth. She is the eighth female child in her family and the father had vowed that if the next birth (hers) would be a girl, he would behead it. On discovery that she has given birth to yet another girl, the mother cries out loudly in the following words:

Onoemenam:...It has happened again. I have committed an abominable act. This is the eight girl from my womb. I am finished O! (p. 2).

Instead of celebrations for a successful delivery, the husband comes to kill the girl but she is thrown into the evil forest by the mother. The husband then quarrels the wife thus:

Ajoife: ...you have succeeded in producing girls

upon girls for me. Your mates are busy giving their husbands male children but you (laughs hoarsely) manufacturer of female children...No woman can ever be my heir. I need a son and that is final (15-16).

Biologically however, it has been proven that it is men who determine the sex of the male children for they possess the XY chromosome while women possess only the XX chromosome, it is the Y that is necessary for the production of male children, why then blame women in such circumstances when they give birth to female children?

Another gender issue dramatized in African and Nigerian drama is that of widowhood practices. In the preface to Asen's *The Woman in Black*, the author observes that:

...the expectation is that when a woman loses her husband, she would get a lot of sympathy and support. But in many cases this does not happen ...rather she is made to lose many things – property, dignity and at times her means of livelihood (vi.)

In different African societies, widows are exposed to different dehumanizing and offensive experiences. According to Salami-Agunloye (2003:23):

All over Africa, women are subjected to oppressive dehumanizing widowhood practices. These practices vary from one culture to another and they include sleeping on bare floor, shaving her hair on the head and the pubic, eating from broken calabash, sitting on ashes, neglect of personal appearance and body hygiene. In some extreme cases, the widow is forced to drink water that has been used to wash her husband's corpse and take an oath to prove her innocence or otherwise.

It is a similar situation that one finds in Asen's *The Woman in Black* and Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*. In *The Woman in Black* when Ochem dies the wife is not even informed. The relatives send two strong men to go and evacuate Ochem's belongings. The wife is also made to drink some nauseating concoctions to prove her innocence. In Sofola's *Wedlock of the God's* Ogwoma is made to undergo a mourning period of not less than three months during which she is not expected to meet any man. It is also expected that she will get married to her late husband's brother irrespective of whether she loves him or not. Instead of sympathizing with the widow, she is accused of responsibility for the husband's death. In both plays, the wives are accused of responsibility for the deaths of their husbands. Ogwoma's case is however different because her mother-in-law is out to avenge her late son's death and as far as she is concerned, Ogwoma but no other person killed her son. She accuses her in the following conversation with her friend Otubo.

Odibei: (still talking to herself) Adigwu cannot die like that.

Otubi: Odibie, people are born and people die. ...she was sick. The sickness refused all the medicine and so he...

Odibei: Adigwu died of a swollen stomach. A man who dies like a pregnant woman did not die a natural death...

...I am looking for the medicine she used (p.6)

The 'she' in the last line refers to Ogwoma. In spite of her futile search for the charm which she claims Ogwoma has used in killing her son and her inability to establish that she has a hand in her son's death the mother-in-law still goes ahead to kill her

and many others in the play in her revenge mission.

Equally of worrisome is the issue of choice of spouse confronting many African maidens. In many African and Nigerian societies, a girl does not have the prerogative to choose who to get married to. Most at times girls are compelled into marrying men of their grand parents' age because such have money to pay for their bride prices to solve one family problem or the other. This issue is closely related to the issue of trading in girl children as if they were commodities. All these have been articulated in many Nigerian plays. Sofola in many of her plays such as *Wedlock of the Gods*, *Memories in the Moonlight*, *The Showers and Lost Dreams* treat this issue extensively. In *Wedlock of the Gods* Ogwoma cannot marry the man of her choice because he does not have the money Ogwoma's family requires to treat their son and as such Adigwu who pays the money is made to marry Ogwoma. It is also on this issue that Rasaki's *Once Upon a Tower* is based. The play is about one Senator, who in a bid to boost his political position as well as hold a grip on his business, arranges a marriage between his daughter and chief Ogbuefi, his business associate. The daughter however elopes with her younger lover. The marriage is however short-lived and the girl dies after an abortion and the husband ends up in jail. Similarly in Tess Onwueme's *A Hen Too SOON* (1985), we are confronted with the problem of Gladys who at eighteen is out of school and forced to marry a man of her grandfather's age. According to Odey (2005:54):

This is a very common scenario. In most parts of Nigeria, girls' education is sacrificed on the altar of greed and or poverty of parents. The girl

child is considered as a commodity that can be exchanged for wealth.

The marriage turns out to be a disaster since even the gods do not approve of it. Also in *The Broken Calabash*, Onwueme challenges the Idegbe tradition which forbids an only daughter from getting married. In the play Ona an undergraduate is condemned to a life of imprisonment and prostitution (Odey, 2009:78). She is not expected to marry but to either remain in her father's house and produce children for him by herself or marry another girl who will perform this function. She does not find life pleasing in her house and becomes pregnant in school as a revolt against the 'Idegbe system.' The death of Ona's father signifies an end to such obnoxious cultural practices. In the words of Utoh-Ezeajugh (2005:5) "...*The Broken Calabash* highlights the plight of women especially unmarried girls in a traditional society that tramples on the rights of women using obsolete customs as a vehicle." It is also on this gender issue that Salami's *The Queen Sisters* is based. Many societies believe that child marriage prevents promiscuity and also protects family honour by preventing teenage pregnancy. Whatever reasons put in its favour, Salami-Agunloye (2006:27) maintains that: "...it has a lot of negative effects on the health, psychology and social wellbeing of women and girls."

The problem of inheritance has also become a very serious gender issue that has attracted the attention of many African dramatists. This problem constitutes a gender issue as it affects widows. In most African societies men together with their wives collectively suffer to acquire whatever they could

have. Unfortunately when the husband dies and leaves the wife behind, the widow is dispossessed of all she had labored to acquire with the husband while he lived. Even wills written in favour of the widows are sometimes disregarded by some families. This issue too has been articulated in many plays such as Wartembergs's *Corpse's Comedy* in which the relations on hearing that Mr. Hagan is dead, visit his house and removes all his furniture, clothes and electronics and also gives them a quit notice to vacate the premises before their next visit. In the following conversation the two relations plan what they will do with the supposed late Hagan's properties:

Essien: Immediately I leave here, I'm going to arrange for someone I know in Kumasi to buy the clothes and furniture I'm going to take from Mr. Hagan's house.

Andoh: Then what shall I have?

Essien: Take the house, eject her from it.

In Asen's *The Woman in Black* too, we meet a similar situation. Eneh's husband dies and rather than send people to inform the wife of the incident, some men are sent to go and bring home his belongings from their rented apartment in the city. The men try to force themselves into the house as is evident in the following conversation:

First man: We have been sent from the village to bring Ochem's belongings.

Mama Iyabo: Could you not wait for her tears to fall first?

Ejirom: Have you no pity that she has young children? Are they not your brother's children?

Second man: The children and all the property will be taken care of by a custodian appointed by the family until the children are grown up.

First man: No time for arguments (To the second man) let's start our job.... Where are the keys (pp.43-44).

Apart from all the aforementioned issues, there is the issue of polygamy which is equally a significant gender issue in Africa till date. In some African societies, one's fame, affluence, honour and riches are judged based on how many wives, children, farmlands, traditional titles etc that he has. To qualify to be a man of honour, some people have married uncountable number of wives such that they do not even have time with many of them. The wives are just like prisoners in a prison yard. While the men are happy keeping the women together, the women suffer physically and emotionally. This issue is dramatized in Salami's *the Queen Sisters* in which we see the king continues to marry more wives because to him:

Ewuare.....More children, more wives, more fame:

The Queen and head wife, complains that:

Enahen: our highness, we are already enough to make up a village.... Their complain is that at the moment you can hardly satisfy all of us, adding more to us will worsen the situation.

Ubi abhors this situation and refuses to be a "fish amongst the fishes in the ocean." And she opts out for to her, marriage is not between "numerous people either,"

There is yet another traditional practice which is dehumanizing and painful with a lot of health hazards accompanying it and is carried out on women in some African societies. This is known as female genital mutilation or rather female circumcision. According to Okoh (2002:84), this is one of the most harmful practices suffered by Nigerian women." She goes on to assert that "it is performed in the belief that it

safeguards virginity, prevents promiscuity and purifies women" (84-85). All these are advanced to convince women to allow it to stay, underneath are more severe side effects as observed by Okoh (2002:85) that:

"...the medical complications of female circumcision are numerous and severe. Apart from the pains and trauma suffered by the circumcised girl during and immediately after the operation the long term effects include chronic urinary tract infections, pelvic infections that lead to infertility, severe scarring and hemorrhage during childbirth".

This issue has been articulated in many Nigerian plays and in all, the practice has been condemned. In plays like Julie Okoh's *Edewede* and in *the Fullness of Time*, Amatu Braide's *the Evil Blade* and Barclays Ayokoroma's *A Scar for Life*. The authors have succeeded in sensitizing their readers about the dangers of this practice. In *Edewede*, Okoh wages the conflict between the older and younger generations. The younger generation is represented by Edewede and she opposes the practice and wishes that it should be abandoned; whereas Ebikere who represents the older generation is of the opinion that the practice be continued. Edewede does not hide her feelings about this practice. She also informs us of the havoc that has been caused by this practice when she says that

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

In defending this barbaric cultural practice, Ebikere responds that:

Ebikere: ...you cannot throw sand on our traditions like that. I warn you. She who gathers a bundle of trouble carries it on her head (p.8).

Even though the older generation would want the practice to be continued, Edewede has succeeded in sensitizing the entire community on the dangers of this practice and the king calls a meeting of the entire community and publicly bans the practice.

King... now I make my declaration public. As from this day. Whereas the initiation ceremonies shall still be performed, female circumcision is banned in this village. Whosoever is found practicing it in any form will not step out of this village alive... (70).

Commenting on the character of Edewede, Salami-Agunloye (2006:38) observes that:

Julie Okoh creates Edewede as the new woman who challenges the age-long cultural practice, which hitherto many women even though not pleased with it, keep mute she is determined to eradicate the practice even though she is faced with several challenges.

Another gender issue treated in African drama and theatre is what Salami-Agunloye (2006:39) refers to as semantic derogation of women. She affirms that: "proverbs, idioms and figures of speech all seek to portray women as weaker, wicked and talkative." She cites Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave* as one play in which words are used to despise women. The king in the play expresses surprise when; women demand for peace and recognition. The king says that:

King Olotu: have I heard rightly? My people, women are taking over the world. But why? Why in my time? (p.19).

He goes further to observe that "it is no bravery to fight with a

woman" (p.19). All these allusions point to the fact that, women are rated below men.

For a long time men have held certain beliefs which have been expressed in words that have continued to hold the woman back in her bid to utilize her potentials. Men have for long believed that a woman's place is in the kitchen and as such should not make any efforts to participate in politics and governance. This is done to allow the men to remain perpetually in power and continue to dominate over women. It is a similar situation that is portrayed in Salami's *More than Dancing* when Madu says that:

Madu: women have no right being in politics. They are our wives. Let them remain at home. That is their duty post (p.54).

The same reasoning continues in the play when Sani says that:

Sani: Why do you bother? Who will give the presidential seat to a woman? In this country! Wa la hi ta la hi, the day a woman becomes president of the Federal Republic, I will cross over to Chad. A woman will not rule me, Allah forbid.

Madu: Tufiakwa, I will swim to Equatorial Guinea.

Sonsare: I will run 880 to Cameroun (p.38).

Sani: When America produces a female leader then Nigeria will be ready to produce one. Until then, tell Professor Nona Odaro to go home and Cook for her husband, period.

All these sayings do not in any way encourage and give hope to the African women that one day the men can accommodate them as partners in progress so that they too can put their abilities to test thereby entrenching and cultivating a culture of 'I cannot do it' in the woman. While the women continue to lag

behind the men continue to suppress and dominate them in all spheres of life.

Conclusion

From the foregoing it has been established that from the beginning of dramatic creations and productions, women and gender issues have continued to feature prominently. However, given the patriarchal nature of most human societies, women have not been able to get a breakthrough yet. The pace of development in the society is very slow this could be attributed to the discrimination against women. It is hoped that with continuous campaigns by playwrights, the situation will change for the better and when this happens, society will be better for it. Women are also encouraged to take up the challenge as some of the characters in the plays analyzed have shown such as Lysistrata, Medea, Nora, Gladys, Edewede, Ubi, Prof. Nora Odaro, and others who have actually brought about significant changes in their societies. Women can learn many lessons from them and emulate these dramatic heroines if actually they are committed to bringing about the desired change. Nigerian men should also borrow a leaf from great nations like Britain and India where women leaders actually contributed immensely to the greatness and development of their societies. They should also give women more leadership positions after all, the few women who have occupied political positions in Nigeria such as Prof. Dora Akunyili, Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iwuela, Prof. Charity Angya, Mrs Farida Mzamber Waziri etc. have not fared badly.

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