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**Women Empowerment in Nigerian Drama: A Contextual Study of
Irene Salami-Agunloye's Heroines**

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Abstract

Discourse on women empowerment in Nigeria has been on-going for decades now, and it will continue to be topical as long as issues of female subjugation, subordination, marginalization and oppression in the Nigerian society persist. And as long as there are still voices speaking up for the empowerment of the female gender, as long as concerted efforts are being made towards the realization of that course, the discourse will continue to be on the front burner of gender developmental discourse. The dramatic space like other realms of the Nigerian society has invested a great deal of talent on female empowerment and positive female character portraiture in dramatic works. One such dramatist who is contributing immensely to the advocacy of women empowerment in Nigeria through her dramatic pieces and other female gender oriented works is Irene Isoken Orosanye Salami-Agunloye. This essay is aimed at situating her female characters and their individual challenges in the present day Nigerian society and it reveals how Salami-Agunloye recreates and empowers her female characters to stand up to and address issues in a closed society that is dominated by the convictions, doctrines and ideologies of the male gender.

Key Words: gender, women empowerment, drama, Salami-Agunloye, African feminism

Introduction

Discourse on women empowerment across the universe has been on-going for quite some time now and it will continue to be topical as long as issues concerning the discontent of women continue to exist. The struggle reverberates around the private and public spheres of human endeavours. It manifests in the social, political, economic, religious, and cultural realms of human activities. It will be recalled that for as long as this struggle has been going on, there have been voices and various mechanisms trying to quell it no avail. Anti-feminists from the outset have put in a great effort to hamper the struggle. Unfortunately for such voices, this is one activity that cannot be ridiculed away the way females have been ridiculed into obscurity for as long as humanity has existed on the surface of the earth.

Opponents of the movement, in their bid to trivialize the essence of the movement have been wont to ask such questions as 'who is oppressing anyone? Or 'who is stopping them from participating?' The above questions like all the other anti-feminist campaigns to pulverize the movement has failed and are still failing because the struggle is gaining more momentum in spite of every challenge it encounters in the course of attaining its end goal which is the emancipation and empowerment of women all over the world.

Drama is one sector that has gotten a firm foothold on the discourse concerning women issues. The art of dramaturgy is a palpable human phenomenon that draws its motivation and inspiration from human experiences within society. Since drama derives its source from human experiences, it logically is a melting pot for addressing issues of women empowerment positively or otherwise, according to the point of view of the dramatist.

While for ages female portraiture in dramatic works was to say the least lacklustre, the momentum gained by the feminist movement enhanced the portrayal of women in contemporary society and this is receiving massive reconstructions that see contemporary female characters crafted in bold, confident and assertive roles. In the Nigerian society, one theatre scholar/practitioner who has been at the forefront of positively overhauling the image of women in her works is Irene Isoken Oronsaye Salami-Agunloye. This essay examines Salami-Agunloye's crafting of female characters in her plays within the context of her traditional Bini society and her larger Nigerian society.

African Derivatives of Western Feminism

The take-off point for most discourse on feminism is hinged on the 18th century agitations of Mary Wollstonecraft's for the right of women. . The initial nomenclature of women liberation over time became subsumed under feminism and feminism logically leads to women empowerment. As the movement gained contemporary prominence, issues of relevance of terms with regards to women's peculiar circumstances came to the fore as it became obvious that the needs of agitators were not homogeneous globally. According to Cyprian Chuduo Obadiogwu (82), 'at the time when the white women's movements were immersed in agitations for the rights of women to work, the black women's main objective was not the right to work but the right to acceptable working conditions and equitable salary.

Obadiegwu's assertions highlight the fact that the experiences of women across the Globe were not always the same at every given time, because while western women were fighting for the right to work, black women had been working for centuries under morally and mortally dangerous conditions.

This realization brought the racial element to the fore in the struggle. Consequently other issues were raised some of which included: economic, cultural, religious and political. The disparity in the diverse needs of women across the world led to non-western feminist agitators seeking alternative nomenclatures that will aptly project their peculiar economic, social, political, religious and cultural realities as opposed to the realities of their western counterparts.

Hitherto, western brands of feminism included such nomenclatures as identified by Catherine Simpson cited in Mabel Ewrierhoma (41): Radical Feminism, Bourgeois Feminism, Cultural Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Black Feminism and Liberal Feminism. The ideologies behind some of these brands of feminism and even the execution of their agenda were, to some non-western activists, extreme and perceived as insensitive to their peculiar circumstances, hence the need for alternative, more suitable nomenclatures.

Some of the nomenclatures that non-western scholars derived from western feminism include: 'Womanism' as expounded by Alice Walker (1983), Angela Davies, Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi (1996) and Mary Kolawole (1997); 'Africana Womanism' by Clenora Hudson-Weems (1993) 'Motherism', advocated for by Patricia Hills Collins, Oyeronke Oyewumi, Catherine Acholonu (1995); 'Stiwanism' by Leslie Ogundipe (1994); 'Nego Feminism' by Obioma Nnaemeka; 'Positive and Negative Feminism' by Rose Acholonu (1995); Chioma Okpara's 'Femalism and Gynism' (1999); Mabel Ewrierhoma 2002; Cyprian Chuduo Obadiegwu 2009).

In spite of the multiplicity of nomenclatures, the goal for every single one of the proponents of these 'isms' is the same, and that is to liberate women from perceived shackles of oppression, suppression, marginalization, and victimization meted out to them by dominant males through obnoxious cultural, traditional, religious, emotional and psychological machineries of intimidation. The achievement of this singular goal is desired within the context of the same structures that entrapped them in the first instance. And that is the basis of the struggle, to change as much as possible the structures, by first changing the mind sets of the progenitors and propagators of the structures.

Irene Salami-Agunloye: Her context, Her Works

Irene Isoken Oronsaye Salami-Agunloye hails from Edo State, an ancient Kingdom, located in that region of the nation now known as south-south Nigeria. A Professor of Theatre Arts, her academic pursuits took her through the University of Ibadan (South-Western Nigeria) and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (Northern Nigeria). She lectures at the University of Jos (North Central Nigeria).

She has at various times been the Head of Department of Theatre and Communication Arts; President, Nigeria Association of Women Academics; National Secretary, Nigerian Participatory Rural Appraisal Network; National Vice President and Treasurer at different times of the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SONTA), President Jos Club of the Federation of Business and Professional Women (*Emotan...* 2001)

She has successfully actualized her callings as daughter, wife, mother academic and mentor to many. As an academic, she is the author of many works including the five plays being studied in this essay. Not content with realizing her full potentials as a human being, she reaches out to motivate and inspire the younger generation to actualize their own potentials by initiating the Shade Tree Theatre and Street Care Africa (*More than Dancing*, 2003).

About Irene Salami-Agunloye, Hussain Tsaku categorically asserts that

as a woman writer, her creative impulse interrogates the boundaries of power and powerlessness and their impact on African females both in the traditional and modern setting... she is an embodiment of [a brand] of feminism which believes in the equality of human beings irrespective of their gender... [she] remains one of the most ideologically engaged female playwrights today (303-4).

According to him, 'as members of society, artistes create in accordance with the particular type of relationship they have with that society, because according to him, 'for any work to be greatly relevant, it must deliberately reflect the stark conditions in their society' (302).

Irene Salami-Agunloye draws her inspiration from her society, the Benin Kingdom. A Kingdom known to have been in existence since 900 AD, the Benin Kingdom is replete with a rich cultural and political heritage. Ironically, it is a society that has strong, deep rooted cultural structures that constrain her women folk. In the words of Ivie Erhahon and Onvughe Ikelegbe, 'the concept of woman in Benin is such that they are seen as *okhuo re owa* (a woman is the home) or '*Iye Owa*' (mother of the home). Consequently, a [married] woman is not allowed to take up employment outside the home... In pre-colonial Bini, the society accorded women the status of second class citizens whose opinions and contributions were often ignored. In that society, women are expected to be seen but not heard because culturally, it is believed that females and all their belongings become their husbands' properties in marriage (3).

Some of the structures that restrain women in Benin Kingdom stem from the following: fundamentally, 'marriage in Bini Kingdom is instituted between two families and not the two individuals concerned. Immediately a woman is married into a family, she automatically becomes the property of the man's family and like every other property which are inanimate the wife is expected to remain mute and stationary' (4). Bini culture also holds that, when a woman dies, it is generally believed that her sins killed her. But when a man dies, the wife is accused of having a hand in his death (8). A Bini woman dared not share her husband's lavatory or use his buckets, soap, sponge towel and other toiletries (6). Belching for a Benin

woman is a taboo, while the same act from a man attracts accolades from both men and women (6).

The above mentioned cultural practices in the Benin Kingdom are but a few in the plethora of practices designed to contain women and keep them where they belong, at the beck and call of their male relations who traditionally define who and what their women should be.

Coming out of such a society that completely subdues her female citizens, it is no wonder then that Irene Salami-Agunloye is waging a war against such primordial negative cultural practices that keep women perpetually subjugated; the slackening of some of those practices in contemporary times notwithstanding.

Irene Isoken Salami-Agunoye has written, contributed and edited several works. Her plays which form the crux of our discourse are: *Emotan* (2001), *The Queen Sisters (Ubi and Ewere)* (2002), *More than Dancing* (2003), *Sweet Revenge* (2004) and *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin* (2008). Interestingly from the above, it can be seen that for four consecutive years 2001-2004 Irene Salami-Agunloye determined and succeeded in creating a play each year in addition to every other demand on her from the various spheres of life.

Analyzing Salami-Agunloye's Heroines

Hussaini Tsaku in his 'Between History and Contemporary Realities: An Examination of Irene Salami-Agunloye's *Emotan* (2009) states that 'as members of the society, artistes create in accordance with the particular type of relation they have with that society', and that 'for any work of art to be greatly relevant, it must deliberately reflect the stark conditions in their society'(302). He goes on further to add: 'for the artiste to communicate meaningfully with the society where they draw their values, traditions and inspirations from, their work must embrace the ethos and pathos of the objective conditions of the people' (302). Tsaku's assertion is indicative of the fact that creative works are not conjured from a vacuum. The inspiration for the writing of creative pieces, come from the events in the artiste's society, and Irene Salami-Agunloye is no different. She gets her muse and inspirations from the richly robust cultural heritage of her Benin society.

Salami-Agunloye's ancestry shaped her into the writer that she is today. Originating from a society that is deeply entrenched in patriarchy is a major driving force behind the writing of most of her works. She seeks in her works to right the wrongs that traditional practices had inflicted on the female gender. However, her works are not restricted to the society of Benin kingdom alone, they treat issues as they relate to women in the larger Nigerian and global society. In attempting to right the wrongs engendered by patriarchy, she imbues her heroines with qualities alien to most patriarchal societies, especially those of African extractions.

In this essay, we are examining Salami-Agunloye's empowerment of her female characters as they demand to have a voice and be relevant in the socio-political realms of their societies. Women play key roles in the five plays under review as they strive to make a difference (positively or otherwise) in their society.

In situating the five plays, Salami-Agunloye draws upon both the traditional and urban Benin societies for their settings, as three of the plays: (*Emotan*, *Idia, the Warrior Queen of Benin* and *The Queen Sisters*) are located in traditional ancient Benin Kingdom while the other two: (*More than Dancing* and *Sweet Revenge*) are located in contemporary urban settings.

The three plays set in traditional Benin Kingdom are based on true life stories of women who actually lived and worked exploits in old Benin Kingdom. *Emotan* re-enacts the life of a legendary Bini heroine who was born around 1380-14, who helped in enthroning the acclaimed greatest Oba of ancient Benin Empire, Oba Ewuare the Great (*Emotan...* viii). *Idia, the Warrior Queen...* tells the story of the beautiful Idia who in many ways defied tradition and culture. She refused to die when tradition demanded that she be killed the day her son ascends the throne. By refusing to die, the revered seat of *Iyoba* (Queen Mother) was established in Benin Empire. To this day, there is always an *Iyoba* except where she dies a natural death. Idia did not stop at being the very first *Iyoba*, she led the warriors of the Kingdom to engage in a battle with the Igalas and came back victorious. From her palace in Uselu, she monitored and subtly contributed to the reign of her son, Oba Esigie. *The Queen Sisters* tells the story of two of Oba Ewuare's wives, two sisters married to the Oba, one of whom almost turned the Benin dynasty on its head

The other two plays *More than Dancing* and *Sweet Revenge* are set in urban cities. The plays see Aisosa rising from the deepest pits of institutionalized patriarchy of the worst kind, to turn the tables on her husband Sota, rising beyond heights he could have imagined possible, while *More than Dancing* sees women calmly taking the reins of power from the hands of those men who refused to create a space for them to be relevant in their society.

In the plays being reviewed, each of the heroines has a unique agenda that drives the totality of her actions. *Emotan*, a simple but highly industrious woman, throws herself completely into ensuring that the injustice done to Prince Ogun is reversed and the kingdom restored to its glory. In spite of the concerted efforts of the kingmakers to ridicule and thwart her efforts, *Emotan* stands her ground. Even when the kingmakers instigated fellow men to get their wives to disgrace and ostracize *Emotan*, she was not deterred. She remained resolute until her goal of enthroning Prince Ogun as Oba of Benin was realised.

Idia, the warrior queen single-handedly took on the kingdom when she defied a tradition that prescribes that on the day a king ascends the throne, his mother must be killed. She broke that particular tradition and through that singular act of hers, the royal title of *Iyoba* (Queen Mother) was of necessity, created. When her son (the Oba), the kingmakers and warlords of the Empire were reluctant to defend the Benin Kingdom against Chief Oliha and the Attah of Igala, *Idia*, led the warriors of Benin to war against the Attah of Igala and his men. She won the war.

Instead of one heroine, *The Queen Sisters* has two heroines: Ubi and Ewere. *The Queen Sisters* tells the story of Oba Ewuare (the great) and two of his wives, Ubi and Ewere who are blood sisters. Ubi, like *Idia* is forced against her wishes to marry Oba Ewuare on account of

her striking beauty. But unlike Idia who embraced her fate and manipulated it to her favour, Ubi vows to bring about drastic changes to the palace in manners that are uncommon in patriarchal Bini society. To curb her excesses, the Oba is cajoled by the same kingmakers who forced him to marry Ubi, to marry her younger half-sister Ewere. Ubi bent on her mission of evoking change would not be deterred, not even by the presence of her sister in the Oba's harem. In the end, Ubi is disgraced out of the harem while Ewere is exulted and status quo is returned not only to the palace but to the entire Kingdom.

Aisosa in *Sweet Revenge* is the perfect supportive wife who encourages her husband to attain his greatest potentials as a human being to the detriment of her personal development. She patiently waits for him when he travels abroad in pursuit of academic excellence. When eventually he returns after eight years without any kind of appreciation of her efforts in keeping his family together, she still stands by him, supporting him in his political ambition. She mobilizes the women of their constituency to vote him into becoming a senator of the Federal Republic. For all her efforts, support and encouragement, as soon as Sota wins the election and becomes a Senator, Aisosa is unceremoniously thrown out of her matrimonial home to make way for his white wife, Cherryl whom he met on his sojourn abroad.

In a turnaround of events, Sota, Aisosa's husband is shamed out of the National Assembly, and Aisosa takes his place as Senator and is even voted Senate President twice, a position that is the third highest political office in the nation.

More than Dancing challenges women's subordinate position in politics. In a calm and calculated manner, the women turn the table on their male party members as they mobilized and organized themselves to produce a female presidential aspirant, Professor Nona Obaro who eventually wins the election to become the first female President of the nation.

The heroines in the five plays come to the table with an agenda that they pursue vigorously. Emotan is ready to lay down her life for a cause she believes in, and she vows as much to her *Eki-Oba 'sisters'*:

... my fellow sisters of Oba market, I greet you all (Itua Uwa) Have no fear for my life. I am ready to lay it down for this cause I am not just fighting for Ogun. I am fighting for the good of Benin. This Injustice must not be allowed to take a bed and lie down in our land (47).

Emotan believed an injustice had been served Prince Ogun who was exiled for no reason other than the selfish intentions of the king makers who perceived that if Okoro Ogun becomes Oba they would not be able to manipulate him to act out their selfish biddings. So they had Oba Orobiru exile his younger brother Prince Ogun from the kingdom, an injustice that was not corrected when Prince Irughe was crowned Oba Uwaifiokun after Orobiru instead of Prince Ogun. To Emotan, that was an injustice that could not be condoned a second time. She locates Okoro Ogun in the forest where he was hiding and together, they plotted how to get him enthroned as Oba. Emotan secretly recruited and trained an army to fight for Prince Ogun's return and enthronement as Oba of Benin. In spite of all the challenges she

overcame in the course of her mission, all she did was not enough. More needed to be done and the only way Emotan could succeed in her mission was if she offers her life as a sacrifice to the gods. A sacrifice she willingly pays to right the wrong that had been perpetuated by the men of her society.

Ubi had a vision to evoke change in her society when she eventually agreed to marry Oba Ewuare. In her exchange with the Iloi in the harem, she tells them that ‘when I made up my mind to come to the harem, it was for a purpose. I came here to fulfill a mission. To bring about a drastic change (31). The strategies Ubi employed in realizing her desired goals of change in the harem included openly antagonizing the Iloi and denying them their conjugal rights and duties in the Oba's bedchamber (31); attending Chiefs-in-Council meetings and demanding that tributes from vassal kingdoms be brought directly to her (58). And when it seemed her plans were not succeeding, she plotted the murder of the Oba (76) and framed her sister Ewere (81) and Chief Osuma (89) for the dastardly act.

Ewere, in contrast to Ubi's rude, obnoxious and arrogant personality (20), is a happy dutiful daughter and wife. On her mission to the palace, she prays ‘may my coming to the harem bring fruitfulness, peace, tranquility, favour and prosperity (53).

Ewere's effervescence, fruitfulness and sanguine nature dispels the barrenness and gloom of Ubi's reign of terror in the harem.

Idia on countless occasions defy tradition as she confides to Iyesogie:

I used to believe that tradition was unchangeable, but now I think you are wrong. Tradition does not and should not dictate the pace of our individual or national progress. We are to determine that... with great prowess I assisted my son to outsmart his elder brother Aruahan... to win the competition set for them by the kingmakers in order to determine their competence for the throne... my son Osawe ascended the throne and became Oba Esigie. I Idia assisted my husband in many ways, helped him prepare for his many battles, gave him wise counsel and support which culminated in his many victories... tell me then Iyesogie, for which of these do I deserve to die?...

(3)

I will not go the way of those before me. I will stand my ground no matter what comes my way (2).

She refused to die when tradition demanded she be killed; against tradition, she manipulated her son to be heir apparent to the throne, against tradition she led the Benin warriors to battle against the troops of Igala land and came back victorious. She reigned in her court at Uselu and unobtrusively helped her son steer the affairs of the land.

Before her foray into politics, Aisosa was the traditionally dutiful wife who reminisces to Ede ‘all a woman wants is to be loved and appreciated for who she is’ (33). But it seemed her yearnings would never be. So when the chips were down, she rose up to the challenge and excelled not just in politics but on the international scene as well. Nona wanted equity for

women in every sphere of life. When she was called upon to serve, she categorically stated her mission thus:

Nigeria is a country made up of men and women. Our reason for desiring to rule is not because we want to install a government that is anti-men. No! We believe in equality and equity. People will get what they deserve because they qualify for it not because of their sex. Our government will be a human faced one where no man or woman is oppressed. We will leave a legacy that will last through the ages (9).

Looking at the characters of the heroines in their approaches to issues plaguing them, they conform to certain molds in the feminist movement and this claim is made with both western and African feminist inclinations in mind. The fundamental ideology of feminism across all societies range from: inclusion of women in mainstream decision making processes, a level playing field for all in every sphere of human endeavor, and the total acceptance of woman as a human being with the same rights as her male counterpart in society capable of making and taking decisions that will contribute to the overall development of her society.

As the movement became globalized various strands in the movement emerged and it became colourized with cultural and racial differences. Salami-Agunloye's heroines are imbued with powers that conform to some recognized feminist ideals. Ubi perfectly fits the western notion of a radical feminist. But in recounting her deeds, the term radical, became a mild concept when compared to the extent to which she went to achieve her radical reforms. Ubi was rude, uncivil, malevolent and almost anti-humanity. She might have had good intentions but whatever good she intended with her radicalism was overridden by her almost inhuman treatment of all those around her with the worst hit being the Iloi. Her blatant disrespect for everyone, lack of courtesy and compassion for anyone especially the women in her life could only portend the disastrous end that became her lot eventually.

Emotan, Aisosa and Nona are epitomes of African womanists or motherists. They are Africans with the firm belief that in the African society both gender are expected to accommodate and complement each other for the society to develop holistically. They only rose to take their stands when they became convinced that the disparity and discrimination in gender relations was no longer acceptable and that status quo needed to be changed. When these women took their stands, because they were justified by their demands they succeeded in attaining their desired changes.

Ewere is the traditional patriarchal heroine, happy in pleasing others and bringing peace and joy to all. Because she is a lacklustre heroine, everyone loves her and even die-hard patriarchs shower her with such encomiums as, according to Chief Osuma:

Ewere has turned out to be a calm, respectful, generous and a very loving person. She is very cool and self-contained, the very essence of dignified womanhood (63).

Iyoba Idia is in a unique class of her own. She is as accommodating as she is radical. In a typical patriarchal society, caught in the eye of culture that is as patriarchal as it can get, she

complemented her husband the Oba, strategically positioned her son to ascend the throne, and achieved deeds that even men trembled to consider.

In the heroines, one sees a select group of women who firmly decided not to play the hand that fate dealt them but resolved to take their destinies into their own hands by rising up to the challenges of patriarchy and overcame most of the structures that have for generations kept women on the margins. By standing up for their humanity and rights to equity and justice, Aisosa and Nona achieved their goals of success and recognition in their society as women to be reckoned with; Idia broke new grounds with her stance that led to the establishment of the institution of *Iyoba*; an institution that stands to this day in Benin Kingdom. She is a respected and valourized Benin heroine who dared where men dared not go. Emotan ensured the return of Prince Ogun who was coronated Oba Ewuare of Benin and she overturned the injustice perpetuated by the kingmakers in the kingdom. Ewere brought back the peace and tranquility that Ubi tried very hard to destroy. Nature has her unique way restoring equilibrium. Ubi by her evil machinations had to receive her reward, and even though the reward came via a flaw that is beyond her control, she got her reward and had to be removed from the palace to allow peace reign once again in the kingdom.

Ubi might turn out to be a pawn in the hands of anti-feminist commentators championing patriarchal status quo when viewed from the angle of her use and abuse of power, the fact however remains that the struggle for women empowerment, equity and justice is a continuous process that will not cease until all forms of marginalization and discrimination against women is eradicated in every society or at worst, reduced to the barest minimum.

It is worthy of note that the global society is beginning to recognize the need to treat women fairly. The Federal Government of Nigeria, for instance, has many women in its executive cabinet and in Edo state, the immediate past governor, Adams Oshiomole took a bold step in that direction when during the Annual Opkekpe Marathon Race, he made the prize money for both men and women equal, a practice which hitherto saw men taking home twenty-five thousand naira as against women's fifteen thousand naira for a race of the same distance ran by all.

Conclusion

Drama is a veritable tool for chronicling and addressing societal issues with the aim of exposing and if possible correcting such issues. Irene Salami-Agunloye is, through her dramatic creations celebrating women's strengths, valour and capacity to excel when they are given the space, respect and recognition for them to act. But where patriarchal structures contrive to tag, bag and drop women on the fringes of society the conscious contemporary woman will resist just as Salami-Agunloye resists such restrictions by empowering her heroines to stand up for themselves to demand and assert their rights to be relevant in the societies they belong to.

Salami-Agunloye's powering of female characters in her plays is a clarion call to women not only in Benin Kingdom or Nigeria, alone but to women all over the world to arise and

renegotiate their place and claim their space in society. She champions her crusade, not from an anti-men platform of extreme feminist radicalism, rather she encourages women to demand and assert their rights humanely recognizing that in every society, no one gender can do without the other. So the earlier anti-feminist men realized that and begin to shift grounds to accommodate the yearnings and aspirations of their womenfolk the easier and faster it will be for such societies to attain true development.

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