

Slow Emergence of Female Playwrights in Nigeria: A Critical Overview.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is motivated by the apparent paucity of female playwrights in Nigeria. For more than three decades studies in dramatic literature, especially as it relates to women, revolved around only two female playwrights – Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme.

The concern of this paper, therefore, is to discover if indeed there are only two female playwrights in Nigeria, why it has to take so long for female playwrights to emerge, what motivated their emergence, how their emergence impacted dramatic literature and criticism.

The paper, consequently, is divided into three main sections each designed to address a set of the questions that drive this investigation. First part of the work is titled “Paucity of Female Playwrights” and the objective is to query the slow emergence of women in the field of playwriting, coming as they did, behind men writing in the same genre and women who are writing in other genres of literature. The statistics furnished by G. I. Achufusi is used to authenticate claims. The second part, titled “Poor Image of Women”, looks at how the negative image of women in plays written by men has generated a lot of debate by the gender-sensitive critics, and acted as motive for the emergence of female playwrights. The third part, titled “Image of women in Women’s Writing” accesses the work of the emergent female playwrights to ascertain how far they differ or comply with the existing image of women in men’s writing.

Keywords: Emergent female playwrights, dramatic literature, gender-sensitive critics, women's studies.

Paucity of Female Playwrights

To say there is great paucity of female writers in Nigeria is to state an obvious fact. Of the three major literary genres – drama, fiction and poetry, the statement applies even more to drama than any of the other two. Achufusi reveals that the statistics of female literary writers in Africa is 158 for poets, 50 novelists and a paltry 27 for dramatists. The statistics was drawn in 1985 but the ratio of women writing in the three genres of literature remains largely the same especially in Nigeria where discussions on female playwrights hardly go beyond Zulu Sofola (1935-1995) and Tess Onwueme (1955-till date). Pondering over this situation, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie wonders why women choose to write fiction and not plays:

Could it be that being a playwright implies production: working in a theatre, after hours, at all hours, in the company of men? Such a profession would be a source of insecurity for some husbands. [1987:10]

Writers all over the world have commented on the paucity of female writing in general and Playwriting in particular and some have suggested reasons for it. These reasons are complex ranging from social and political conditions of women in the society to economic and educational/professional empowerment of women. Gender politics is responsible for women's near absence from literary creativity. The situation is more clearly defined in the Western world where the tradition of patriarchy made no attempt to conceal its objection to female creativity. Deirdre David records a remark addressed to Charlotte Brontë by Robert Southey in 1837. Southey is quoted as saying that:

Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those duties you have not been called, and when you are, you will be less eager for celebrity. [1987:vii]

This summarizes the condition that made it almost impossible for women in that society to participate in literary production. The women were already weighed down by their domestic roles, roles that Charlotte Brontë describes as, "dark and dreary" but which Southey sees as "proper duties". It must

be pointed out that the situation has hardly changed for women in Africa today. Domestic chores are still largely a woman's sole responsibility, except, perhaps for the upper class women who have well trained domestic workers handling different aspects of the work – drycleaners, gardeners, cooks, baby-sitters and nannies, drivers and the rest of them. The vast majority of women are still saddled by domestic work.

This traditionally assigned role of the woman, as a wife, mother, and a housekeeper is so old that it has come to be regarded as her natural role, primordially assigned by God Himself. The implication of such cosmic connection is that any woman who fails to do these duties will answer to the supernatural being. The fear of this supernatural being, who is always portrayed as wrathful and unpredictable – be it the alien God of the Hebrews or the Arabians, or the thunder God of the African pantheon – will definitely force any mortal to comply with the orders. And in complying, a woman loses the chance to make any meaningful contribution in the mainstream of affairs, which in turn leads to her loss of relevance in the society. It is, therefore, not surprising that most women who make it at the mainstream do so at the expense of a stable home, unless of course they have supportive husbands. Thus successful women are often associated with broken homes or spinsterhood. This is because their ambition to achieve some recognition in life interferes with their traditional roles as mothers, wives, and domestic workers. The women who try to straddle the two opposing tasks often end up not succeeding in any of them. Thus, the fact that most female writers produce their work in this condition may be responsible for the shallowness and formlessness associated with most women's writing, which male critics denounce. Indeed, some women writers who were committed to their writing were often mistaken for men when they distinguished themselves. For instance, the publishers of Deirdre David once addressed her as 'Mr'. [1987: 225]

The experience of Mary Evans, who had to adopt the pseudonym "George Eliot", in order to be published, also proves that the problem was not that women could not produce powerful works but that they were simply not welcome in the literary world which was then monopolized by men. The female writer, Harriet Martineau, also published three articles under the pseudonym 'Disciphulus'. [p.28] This deliberate assumption of a male identity is not only an evidence of the gender bias against women writers in that period, but also an indication that these women's work measured up to the acceptable standard.

It is important to mention this in order to show how serious the situation was in the Victorian era. David's book is an assessment of three particular women – Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett

Browning and George Eliot – who defied the patriarchal injunction against female authorship and who in spite of the rejection they suffered in the hands of the patriarchy, succeeded in making their marks as literary giants.

The absence of women in anthologies and reviews of creative works all over the world and the unfavourable critical responses to women's writing, in the past, have motivated the establishment of books and journals, now too numerous to count, dedicated to a feminist study of women's works. Trevor Griffiths and Margaret Llewellyn-Jones edited one of such books, the purpose of which, they explain, was to

...record, celebrate and interrogate the nature of the achievement of women theatre writers and to begin to redress the balance because the standard works in British theatre pay scant attention to women's writing. [1993: ix]

Griffith and Llewellyn-Jones reveal that women's invisibility in the theatre in Britain and Ireland is due to the fact that their theatre work "often takes place in the 'fringe' venues outside the mainstream (male) theatrical tradition" [1993:3]. Their book titled *British and Irish Women Dramatists Since 1958: A Critical Handbook*, therefore, is aimed at discovering the works of women, which were in the danger of slipping into oblivion, as well as analyze and reappraise the ones that had been given inadequate treatment.

Llewellyn-Jones informs us that between 1969 and 1978, women's theatre contribution took the form of collaborative efforts in which subjects were drawn from street happenings and personal experiences of the women. While Llewellyn calls this "innovative", Michael Billington calls it "lamentable" because he complains that the work of the women were "myopically concerned with problems of being a woman."

Trevor Griffiths, reflecting on the mainstream women playwrights in the 1980s reveals that within this period, in spite of unfavourable economic conditions, there was an increase in the number of women's plays staged at the established theatre houses. The austere nature of women's theatre made it most suitable for production in times of economic downturn.

In her own contribution to the celebration of women playwrights, Susan Croft compiles a long list of plays by women. The idea, she explains, is to reveal that women's plays have been ignored for obvious reasons, and that for black women in Britain, they are doubly doomed to literary obscurity because of both racial and gender reasons.

Here in Africa the condition of near absence of female writing has been largely blamed on the educational gap between men and women – an explanation which Maryse Conde finds very difficult to accept, at least not completely. In an age when educated women have become a common sight and a good number of them have achieved political recognition, it is difficult to accept educational imbalance, any more, as being responsible for the dearth of female writing. The issue cannot be education per se, she argues, but rather the quality of the education women are exposed to. Referring us to Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, Conde invites us to appraise the quality of the education provided for women and she queries,

Isn't it rather the very complexity of her condition, which forces the African woman to remain silent since she feels unable to come to terms with it? [1972:133]

The late education of women, and the quality as well as the content of the education considered proper for them, therefore, are partly responsible for the slow emergence of female playwrights in Nigeria. At the turn of twenty-first century, however, none of these excuses can be defended, any more.

Among the three literary genres, drama is the most adventurous because of the socio-cultural and communal nature of it. Drama, as a melting pot of all arts, demands keen observation of the socio-ideological trends in the wider society. But a woman's roles as home maker, mother and wife help to limit her view of the society. Her awareness of the society being largely limited to family relationships, these naturally form the bulk of her writing, whereas critics do not view domestic themes as serious themes. Thus women's peripheral position reduces their capability to signify as credible vehicles for the representation of the society. It also, invariably, affects their mastery of dramatic technique. Again, unlike poems and novels that can move quietly from the privacy of the writer's table to a publishing house and then to the reader, a play must go through the rigours of a performance. It will be something else but a play if it is not performed. The women studied in this paper have produced all their plays at least once. It takes the bold and adventurous to put a play on stage and for a woman it is even more so. Working with the cast and crew, majority of who are often males, and whose sense of sexual superiority is still intact, is a great challenge. Ayo Akinwale narrates how the first female playwright in Nigeria, Zulu Sofola's husband used to wait through her rehearsals in order to take her home very late in the night. Even a supportive husband will find it difficult to cope with such a situation for a long time. Perhaps this is why women find it more convenient to write poems and novels than to write plays. Insufficient exposure to socio-political dynamics, delayed

formal education, as well as highly restricted educational exposure, sheer sexual suppression, not to mention a poor financial condition, may all be factors against female creativity, but the most universal and more enduring factor seems to be her traditional role as a home maker, a situation in which she is expected to spend almost her entire life responding to the demands of others, with no time or opportunity for her to define and satisfy her own needs. Men have, thus, dominated and are still dominating mainstream literary production, with the representation of the society becoming the exclusive preserve of men, and life being thus viewed mostly from the male point of view. In that view, women are often misrepresented, hence the uncomplimentary and unconstructive image of women in works of literature and the subservient role of women in the society.

The obstacles against women's literary activities, notwithstanding, there are more female playwrights in Nigeria than theatre scholarship reveals. Stella Oyedepo, about the most prolific dramatist in Nigeria, started producing plays about the same time as Tess Onwueme, but Nigerian scholars and critics chose to ignore her for whatever reason. According to a PhD thesis submitted in the Department of Theatre Arts of the University of Ibadan, in 2005, by this writer, more women have been discovered who have produced appreciable number of plays and whose plays are worth study at all levels of education. These women are still alive and writing and they include Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, Onyeka Onyekuba-Iwuchukwu, Chinyere Okafor, Irene Salami-Agunloye, etc.

Many writers – male and female alike – have criticized the poor condition of women in the society and the poor image of women in literature.

Poor Image of Women in Literature

Women came into literature in two capacities, first as characters – objects of creative imagination and desire – and then as writers and creators of meaning. A critical study of female characters in male writing shows a misrepresentation of women either because, being men, they do not understand women experiences or they do not care to present a truthful image of women. The image of women in men's work, especially the older generation of male writers, has remained static and uncomplimentary, in total contradiction to the changing role of women in the present socio-political structure, giving cause for feminist protestation.

Iris Berger, in her study of female spirit mediums in Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Northwestern Tanzania, states that in Burundi women are believed to be clumsy, emotional and prone to jealousy and these characteristics do not only differentiate them from men but also render them inferior to men. The little strength women have is suitable only for menial tasks. The superiority of men over women in that region is further illustrated in the act of procreation in which the woman is described as the “passive earth” [1976:161] while the man is the sower of the seed. This belief obviously stems from an archaic attitude to sex in which women were forbidden to enjoy sex or express their sexuality. And to further ensure that they did not, women were taken through the inhuman act of female circumcision. The irony is that women in such cultural setting grow up with the conviction that it is wrong to enjoy sex and it is natural for a woman to suffer pain during love making and childbirth. They thus act as willing accomplices to their own dehumanization.

Sandra Richards describes Baraka’s plays as “almost overwhelmingly male-dominated and woman hating” and she considers this a major pitfall in Amiri Baraka’s dramaturgy, for, in the place of the more realistic images of “positive, self-centred beings forging independent lives and working for the common good of both women and men”, Baraka, a leading black playwright of 1964-1974, insists on the awesome stereotype image of:

...the evil white woman who is aggressively independent of everyone; the neurotic black woman who consciously wills her own destruction; and the black or white woman who is a paragon of political virtue. [1982:234]

In conclusion, Richards declares that “Baraka’s portrayal of women is instructive of what writers must not continue to do”[p.240].

Through negative portrayals in literature men reveal their desire to suppress women. The question that readily comes to mind is why would they want to do that? Is it possible that men see women as a threat to their own existence? Is this a pointer to a pristine feminine power, which men are in constant fight to wrench from them? Whatever the answer to these questions may be, the fact remains that women have been represented in male narratives mostly in negative light. And though some writers, notably Western historians and anthropologists, such as Judith Van Allen and some Nigerian writers notably Kamene Okonjo, would want us to believe that the oppression of women was the effect of Western influence, some indigenous cultural studies have proved, through an examination of ancient cultural beliefs and practices embedded in our myths, folklore, proverbs and

oral literature, that the poor image of women began from the most ancient days, and represents the actual condition of women in the society. It is a heritage of our own past.

Oyesakin [Adefioye Oyesaki:1981] reveals a contradictory image of women in Yoruba literary accounts. Women are seen as embodiment of both sweetness and death. It is not mentioned which of the two embodiments outweighs the other, or whether there is a stable balance, but the article dwells more on the negative image. According to the account, the femininity of the woman makes her both attractive and irresistible to man but there is danger in associating with her which is the reason why Ifa warns men to be wary of her. The Yoruba traditional oral poetry, as revealed by Oyesakin [1997:6] in yet another of his articles, is full of derogatory remarks about women. Women are seen as responsible for all the ills of the society. They are noted for moral bankruptcy, loose tongue, gossip, flippancy, rumour mongering, hypocrisy, treachery, and many more. Oyesakin feels that the Yoruba society is not fair to the women because all these negative attributes women are accused of were nurtured by the society itself. To illustrate this point the writer reasons that men are partially to blame for the inquisitiveness of women, which compliments men's secretive nature. Again, the polygamous marriage system favoured by men can be said to be responsible for women's infidelity.

The inquisitiveness of women seems to be the female character trait which is most feared by men. We are meant to know that men cherish their little secrets as much as they cherish their lives, hence the statement that "The day a woman knows the secret of a cult, that cult is destroyed". This statement is echoed in the works of all the scholars who have written on masquerade theatre. Because of this belief, whose veracity is in doubt, women are banned from the masquerade cult, a very important spiritual and the highest political institution in Igbo and Yoruba lands.

Still in his critique of the accusations levelled against womanhood, Oyesakin goes on to posit that the possible reason why women are accused of avarice in Yoruba land is because they are traditionally entrusted with the responsibility of processing and selling their husbands' farm products. If his reasoning is correct then it has proved that these allegations against women are mere figment of male imagination, which goes to corroborate Azuonye's claim that these are just "akuko ifo" (tales of the imagination) and should not be regarded as "akuko ala" (true tales). [1992: 2]

In analyzing what he refers to as "the earliest formulations of womanist and matriarchal responsibility within the power structure of the society" in Yorubaland, Layiwola recalls the myth of origin of the great Egungun cult. The secret of the Egungun was revealed, first, to a woman, Odu, by

the supreme deity. The woman, allegedly, became power drunk with it, which made her subordinate, Obarisa to trick her and seize the power from her, with the permission of the supreme deity. It is important to note that Odu was alleged to have lost her political power to power-drunkenness and not to flippancy, and she did not destroy or desecrate the cult contrary to Ifa allegations. Having thus seized the power of the Egungun, men edged out the women, leaving them in charge of peripheral duties and never again allowing them near the inner circle where important decisions are taken. Thus women lost the right to take part in policy making in the society. The loss of such political power amounts to loss of citizenship, critically speaking. This precisely is the status of a slave or a criminal in a society.

If Egungun is the highest policy making body in Yoruba land and women are banned from it, then Gèlèdè, which is a women's masquerade cult, is necessary to establish a balance. But Gèlèdè does not have the authority, however, to make laws for the society. The point to make here is that women were banned from power politics in Nigeria and this naturally leads to a poor knowledge of very important aspects of the society.

Layiwola's account of Yoruba folklore can be seen to concur with Azuonye's account of that of the Igbo. Both accounts reveal the pristine supremacy of the matriarchy and how men in each society seized power from the women. Since both are folkloric accounts of the gender situation in the ancient traditional Yoruba and Igbo societies, they are the 'akuko ala' (the true tales) and not 'Akuko ifo' (tales of the imagination) of Azuonye's categorization. The Igbo myth, as narrated by Azuonye shows that Ala, the Earth Goddess, was the supreme deity of the Igbo people, most powerful and most popular. The Sky God, perhaps out of jealousy, most likely, in the absence of any other explanation, contested and seized power from the Goddess thereby establishing patriarchal supremacy. Actually, the supreme position of Ala had been threatened twice, at least, before the arrival of the colonial masters. The Nri hegemony, which ruled Igboland at a point in time, adopted the idea of a complex supreme deity that combined both quality and function of male and female. But when Nri was replaced by Aro patriarchy, an all-powerful male deity, Chukwu, was instituted. The Nri and Aro religio-political order were not popular however and their reign was short-lived because the populace still regarded Ala as their supreme deity. Later, however, the arrival of the European explorers prepared the ground for the suppression and marginalization of Ala. The colonial intruders' emphasis on material aspects of life, ignoring the spiritual aspects, watered the ground for the entrenchment of the Hebrew god of wrath and war. The materialistic emphasis of the colonizers found ready allies in

the male physical strength, and material possession became the determining factor for superiority. That was how, with men being in control of material aspect of the society, they naturally assumed superiority over women.

Azuonye's account clears the air about the apparent contradiction in the perception of women in the society. They are both objects of awe and contempt. Men desire and fear them at the same time. The negative image of women therefore becomes an evidence of male propaganda against the authority of the woman and, carefully and persuasively presented, it naturally influenced the society's view of and attitude towards women. This establishes the fact that literature can change the society and that women too must use literature to correct the society's opinion of the female gender.

Using an Igbo proverb, "onye mma ebugi nwanyi egbuo" (if one is not killed by a deity, he will be killed by a woman) to analyze Igbo attitude towards women, Opata submits that,

The proverb then is a dispositional statement arising from the male progeny and expressive of man's fear of and dread for woman, of the mysteriously tremendous nature of woman, and of his discomfiture the perceived intractable dualism he ascribes to woman. [1992:108]

The contempt against women was bred by men's fear of them, and Opata says this should not be seen as male chauvinism but a celebration of male powerlessness.

The persistence of such negative images of women in modern literary portrayals points to either an uncritical adoption of moribund ideas and beliefs or a wilful act of callousness on the part of modern literary writers, seen by gender-sensitive critics, as part of male conscious effort to keep the female under perpetual control. From the beginning of literary history in Nigeria, the changing role of women has often been ignored by mainstream writers. The result is that the image of female characters in the literary text often contradicts the image of women in real life. The contradiction is strengthened by the fact that though women of today have proved their capacity to contribute to the mainstream of the society, writers still favour the silent, docile and passive character of the traditional woman. Nnadozie Inyama observes that the image of, what he calls, the 'rebel girl' that dominated oral literature still persists in the works of modern elites notably male writers. After a study of four literary works - Amos Tutuola's *Palmwine Drinkard*, Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*, Ama ata Aidoo's *Anowa* and Efua Sutherland's *New Life in Kyerefaso* - the writer discovers that while the theme is critically reproduced and deconstructed in the works of the women, the men seem to uphold the traditional verdict that the rebel girl must be doomed to a terrible end. However, in sharp

opposition to the traditional treatment of the theme, and its ratification by male writers, the non-conforming female is made a big success in Sutherland's work, signaling a feminist rewriting of traditional oral literature. Though the rebel girl, Anowa, fails in Aidoo's play, so does the husband that betrays her. This is a clear feminist angle to a traditional theme, a lesson in social justice.

Until Osofisan started what can be termed his defence of the oppressed, the status of female characters in Nigerian literature remained that of traditional domestic workers or doomed independent seekers. In her traditional subservient position, a woman is the ideal woman, the perfect woman, docile and dependent. In their chauvinistic way, the male writers will simply not have her any other way. Thus when they are forced to come face to face with the reality of an independent and assertive modern woman, they are shocked out of their wits and in that state of shock and confusion, they give a distorted description of the New Woman. Whatever may be their reason, the fact remains that some modern male writers still portray talented women as evil.

Analyzing the condition of the talented women in African literature, Juliet Okonkwo declares that as long as it is men's world, talented women have no chance of rising to eminence, however hard they try. This is because men in their chauvinistic nature will always safeguard their political power over women. While agreeing that women should fight against male domination, she however, is of the opinion that it is only education that can help women to win this war. Only complete education, not half, can liberate women from the shackles of male domination. The fate of Efuru and Anowa, two female characters from the works of two African female writers – Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo – prompted Okonkwo's suggestion. Efuru and Anowa are two female characters who dare to reject the false image of women in their society by exploring their true talents. They discover themselves as intelligent and economically independent human beings, which essentially means that they do not need anybody to think for them and to provide for them, rather they are the ones to provide for others. Rather than being a blessing, however, their independence becomes a curse to them. Their society does not accept a woman in any other capacity than as a wife and a mother, or a housekeeper, completely dependent and subservient to a man, prone to exploitation, subjugation and oppression. Though Okonkwo strongly believes that education will enable women overcome their inferiority complex, the experience of Anowa and Efuru, however shows that a woman may be liberated from economic bondage to a man, but she may still have to battle with the guilt of childlessness. A childless woman, literate or illiterate, cuts a very poor image of womanhood in the societies in which these two plays are set. The heroines themselves know that their joy will not be complete without a child of

their own, because in the African society, the ability of women to bear children gives them the edge over men and men respect them for this. This is why they often refer to women as “our mothers”, when they want to show that respect. A woman who is a mother receives more respect than the one who is not. Today’s woman does much more than childbearing, but she is still defined by her traditional role as though her achievements do not count.

Also prompted by the fate of these two female characters who are destroyed by the patriarchal society for their intellectual and economic independence, Maryse Conde blames the fate of Anowa and Efuru on semi-literacy. This is because though both characters are opposed to the traditional norms of their society, which they succeed in proving wrong through their intellectual and economic independence, they are still attached to tradition, thereby failing to sustain the personality they have carved out for themselves. They allow themselves to be daunted by the traditional belief that a childless woman is useless to the society. Conde’s argument is that the illiterate societies in which the two female characters find themselves do not offer any other opportunity for a woman to prove her relevance, apart from childbirth. With a good formal education, however, says Conde the two women would have been able to find alternative ways of proving their relevance. Irked by the thought that gifted women such as Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo could create female characters doomed to fail in the same phallogentric manner as men writers do, Conde goes on to say:

Flora and Ama Ata’s intelligence and sensitivity persuade them that the African woman has an important role to play in the future of Africa and that in the past it was the same. But for all this faith there remains a doubt on the value of their world nurtured by the daily sight of their complex and contradictory society torn between different ideals and poisoned by self-distrust. [1986:139]

Conde sees subtle protest in the works of these two female writers. The protest is directed towards their society which is structured in a way as to make it difficult for a woman to grow. Chidi Ikonne describes this type of society, which rubs the life out of Anowa and Efuru, as a society in which “A woman’s life counts for nothing as long as the prestige of the man and the integrity of the family – that cornerstone of the patriarchy – over which he presides are intact.” [1986:69] He points out that the female genital mutilation, which Efuru is made to go through, has no other function than to castrate the women in order to reduce female sexual power over male weakness. To add to Ikonne’s assertion one can look at this ritual of castration not only as having reductive physical effect on the women but a spiritual one, leading the heroine to lose hope in life.

Stressing further the importance of literature as an effective weapon for women's struggle against socio-political subjugation, and illustrating with some women who have used this weapon effectively, Ogbuehi, C. U. declares:

Literature offers freedom to women to write and influence situations that are detrimental to their well-being. Literature empowers women to speak fearlessly to fictional husbands, fathers, brothers, sons and dictators. [1999:45]

She cites examples of women who have used literature to achieve recognition for themselves in particular and women in general, including George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) and Currer Bell (Charlotte Brontë). A third woman whom Ogbuehi mentions, and who achieved prominence through her writing is Harriet Beecher Stowe who was accorded great respect by President Abraham Lincoln of The United States of America because of her powerful writing, especially *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – which was her contribution to the campaign against slave trade. In Africa Ogbuehi mentions Micere Mugo, a feminist and academic, formerly of the University of Kenya but now on exile. For her Ph.D project, Mugo investigated the activities of the high-ranking female soldiers of the Mau Mau Freedom Fighters. Before her study, Kenyan history had no record of these women. Another female, Nawal El Saadawi, also uses her writing to criticize her Arab society that oppresses the women. Her ambition to achieve something in life earned her rejection by her country and her various husbands. As the story goes, her first husband asked her to choose between him and Medicine (she is a medical doctor – a psychiatrist by profession) and she chose medicine. Her second husband asked her to choose between him and writing and she chose writing. Her present husband happens to be a writer himself. The Egyptian Government gave her the sack after her book *Sex and Health* was published. Also, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt once jailed her because of her writing.

The experiences of these women appear to explain why writing is thought, by some writers, not to be the business for women. The persecution of writers is as old as writing itself and for women it is even more so. A writer cannot shut his or her eyes to social problems and the perpetrators of those problems, who most often are the people in authority. On the other hand, a woman writer cannot pretend about the gender imbalance in the society. She, therefore, becomes a double target. The authorities persecute her and the society rejects her. Thus she stands to be imprisoned or to lose a stable home as in the case of Saadawi; be exiled as in the case of Micere Mugo or suffer sheer discrimination as in the case of Mary Evans and Currer Bell. Writing therefore constitutes a double hazard for a woman. She has a bigger price to pay than her male counterpart.

Ogbuehi urges women to emulate the examples of these women to empower themselves with literary writing in order to achieve the following - reverse the wrong and false image of women; rescue female writers from male critics who appear bent on destroying women writers through malicious criticism; deconstruct our proverbs with a view to creating new ones that project a positive image of women. They should also embark on book projects with the aim of producing for children and youth textbooks that do not encourage sexism. Obviously, at the time of her writing, Ogbuehi was not aware that such a project already exists in Kenya, with Wanjira Muthoni as a co-initiator. Explaining in an interview with Susan Arndt, [1999:2] Wanjira says the project, which is titled “Literary Road to Empowerment” is aimed at changing the way young people view themselves and each other, and the long run objective is to eliminate sexual stereotyping among future adults.

The works of major literary writers in Nigeria, who are mostly male and among whom are the icons of Nigerian literary profession, including Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi, J.P. Clark, John Munonye and Christopher Okigbo, have received much indictment from gender-sensitive critics, especially Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1988) Nnaemeka Obioma (1996), Catherine Bicknell (1996), Rose Acholonu (1996), Nwachukwu Agbada (1997), Okome Onokoome (1997), on account of their negative portrayal of women or complete neglect of women in their works.

Rose Acholonu acknowledges the advancement of Achebe’s ideology as it concerns, on one hand, the socio-political condition of our country, and the status of women on the other. In appreciation of the role of the two female characters in *Anthills of the Savannah* – Beatrice and Elewa – Acholonu declares that;

Achebe’s women have definitely evolved in the course of time, from the outsiders they tend to be in the traditionally set works, to their present near-centre position as possible insiders. [1996:320]

These two women are more individuated than their counterparts in Achebe’s earlier novels. Acholonu however, wishes women would be given a place in the art of governance.

Obioma Nnaemeka has an opposing view about Achebe’s heroines in the *Anthills* for she insists that rather than elevate women, Achebe continues in his systematic subjugation of women. She reveals that language is the greatest agent of subjugation of women in all Achebe’s novels. The critic writes of Beatrice,

All her academic accomplishments notwithstanding, Beatrice, in her utterances leaves the reader with the impression that she received her “walloping honours degree” not in English but in Eroticism...

We hardly saw Beatrice function in her capacity as senior assistant secretary in the Ministry of Finance. We saw her function primarily as the girl-friend of Chris, the companion of Ikem and a play thing in the hands of HE. [1996:292]

She goes on to analyze Beatrice as “the most questionable feminist character” in a work of literature. She complains of Beatrice’s “condescending attitude” and “unprovoked belligerence” towards other female characters, her “uselessness as a feminist” and she declares that “The tragedy of Beatrice is that she is silenced and written out of the text at a critical moment in the play.” [1996:293] Nnaemeka is here declaring a feminist stance on the treatment of female characters. Female characters must be shown as individuals of their own right and not to be depicted in the age-long stereotype position as appendages to men.

Catherine Bicknell observed that Igbo women enjoy greater prominence in the society than they do in Achebe’s novels. She refers us to Kamene Okonjo and Judith Van Allen’s sociological account of the power enjoyed by Igbo women. She agrees with Nnaemeka that Beatrice character should have been developed along the line of her academic and career achievements. Bicknell observes that:

At the end of the novel, the women are still conceived, to a large extent in the symbolic terms of priestess and mother and the question of what role women will play in the future is left open. [1996:277]

Also exploring the use of speech as indicator of power relation between men and women in Achebe’s novels, Grace Okereke submits that through speech the subservient and inferior position of women are evidenced in Achebe’s novels. She states that it is only in domestic sphere that women speak with any level of authority, when they tell their children stories or settle quarrels among them. She goes on to reveal that women hardly use proverbs and that their speech depicts the limits of their knowledge about society. With regards to Achebe’s traditional and modern novels, the critic recognizes as Acholonu does, that Achebe has improved in his portrayal of women by portraying full-grown and outspoken female characters like Beatrice.

Femi Osofisan, one of Africa's leading and most popular playwrights, has so far been the only one who has received commendation from gender-sensitive critics on the image of women in his plays. Tess Onwueme finds Osofisan's portrayal of women as a refreshing experience in drama. She praises the playwright for his nonconformist transformation of the usually static and negative images of women in dramatic writing. She notes specifically that Osofisan's use of young and progressive women is most appropriate to achieving his purpose of social change and social reconstruction. She finds out that Osofisan's image of women is in constant advancement. From *Once Upon Four Robbers*, his heroines are becoming more independent, forceful, enlightened and socially conscious.

It has to be pointed out here that Onwueme's own heroines possess the characteristics of being young, progressive and conscious, which may go to show that Onwueme did not just study Osofisan, she is also influenced by him.

Still on Osofisan, Eldred Ibibiem Green absolves the playwright of all the accusations which Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi levels against Nigerian male writers who present a negative and diminished image of women. With reference to Osofisan's women in *Morountodun and Other Plays* Green points out that Osofisan is different from many Nigerian and African writers in the way he systematically avoids the usual passive female characters that have become the favorite of male writing. On the account of this tendency for Osofisan to present dynamic female characters, Green decides to categorise him as a feminist. This is arguable because one does not become a feminist just by writing about women as we have seen in Nnaemeka and Bicknell's arguments. Osofisan is a social critic and in his fight for social justice his sympathy goes to the neglected people in the society and women happen to be among this group. The condition of women is not a main focus in Osofisan's plays as we see in, say, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. The defence which the playwright puts up for Angola who is an armed robber is not different from that which he puts up for Alhaja the prostitute. What these characters have in common is that they are victims of socio-political double standards. Onwueme is a social critic too, but her feminist vision is seen in the way she empowers her heroines with physical and mental capability to enable them fight against selected socio-cultural practices that are oppressive to women.

What we have done above is to assess women's opinion on the unconstructive image of women in literature. We have found out that women are opposed to such portrayals which they believe to be a purposeful act of male writers to discredit women. The puzzling question is why the fictional image of women has remained unchanged in spite of the achievements women have made in every

sphere of human endeavour. Whatever the answer to this may be, the fact remains that the negative image of women still persists in modern literary writing and gender-sensitive critics find it unacceptable because it is a proof of the sexual intimidation and oppression, which the modern women are fighting against.

With sufficient academic attainment, women have begun to write. The content and form of their writing is of great importance because of their apparent deviation from any previously known pattern. Equally important is the degree of acceptability of women's writing to the critics who are used to men's style of writing, a style that has been variously described as groin-centred, male-centred, chauvinistic, phallogentric and phallic. [1987:7]

The Image of Women in Women's Writing

Deirdre LaPin traces the development of women in African literature from the traditional oral period to the modern literary tradition. Citing examples from different parts of Africa – Xhosa, Kikuyu, Yoruba and Hausa – the writer reveals that as performers in the oral tradition, women “exercised their prerogatives as oral artists to control audience attitudes towards their sex”. [1987:106] In the transitional period when the oral tales were set to print, female writers, for instance Flora Nwapa, seem to adopt male view of women, a situation which the writer says is understandable because “Old tales furnished a starting point for re-thinking the woman's role.” [p.109] By creating nonconforming heroines, however, this first generation of female writers prepared the ground for the advent of feminist rebellion. Within the modern dispensation, women are seeking a new place for themselves in the society and as writers they use their work to secure that new place for women.

In the light of a gross misinterpretation of women and womanhood in the works of American and African writers, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie states that female writers' commitment should start with rediscovering what woman really is as opposed to what she is made out to be, and by deconstructing existing knowledge to supply the missing women's perspectives. The writer declares that female writers,

should be committed in three ways: as a writer, as a woman and as a third world person; and her biological womanhood is implicated in all these. [1987:10]

The writer is surprised to find that some women shy away from being identified as feminists, the possible reason being that, in spite of their commitment to the cause of women, they are themselves thoroughly browbeaten by men.

Katherine Frank traces the beginning of feminist writing in Europe from Henrik Ibsen's (1879) *A Doll's House* when "our heroine slams the door on her domestic prison". The female character since then has been on the quest for self-discovery. Frank then sets out to examine the situation in Africa believing that,

With its peculiarly Western orientation toward individualism and self-fulfilment and its simultaneous exploration of patriarchal oppression and the female struggle for freedom, one might gather that this feminist scenario would hold little relevance for African novel. [1987:14]

With that conviction Frank chooses five novels by four African Women – Mariama Bar's *So Long a Letter*, Flora Nwapa's *Once is Enough*, Buchi Emecheta's *Double Yoke* and *Destination Biafra* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Kill Joy*. Frank discovers that not only is feminist novel alive in Africa but it is even more radical and more militant than in the West. The surprising thing is that in spite of the education and independence of the heroines of these novels, they end up lonely and sad, thereby fulfilling the strongly held belief that,

A woman may gain the whole world, but she would have lost her soul if she doesn't become a male's extension or some body's mother. [1987:17]

The writer is as surprised as Ogundipe-Leslie that in spite of the militant tone of these female novelists they, especially Buchi Emecheta, deny that they are feminists. The cause of such self-denial is to be found in the complexity of the African woman's life, the writer concludes.

This tendency in some women writers to destroy their heroines even after empowering them with all it takes to surmount the obstacles that have impeded the advancement of the female gender is counter-productive to female struggle. It can be seen as a mirror technique aimed at pricking the conscience of the society for a possible rethinking. But that also amounts to begging for the rights of women instead of asserting it. The image of self-reliant women in the work of female writers is representative of the changing role and status of women in this modern time. It is a truthful portrayal of women, but making these women come to harm is out of tune and detrimental to the struggle for social reconstruction, because it clearly discourages female emancipation thereby ratifying the subjugation of women. Presumably the personal experiences of these women will persuade them to illustrate how difficult it is for women to make it to the mainstream. But they should not lose sight of

their commitment as female writers who are not just writing about their life experiences but are using those experiences as a motivational force to sue for a social rethinking.

Conclusion

The statistics quoted at the beginning shows that of all the three main genres of literature, drama is the list traversed by female writers. The foregoing is an overview of the advent of women in the creative field of playwriting in Nigeria, from being objects of meaning in male writing to becoming creators of meaning. The paper attributes the slow emergence of female playwrights in Nigeria to two major factors – late education of women and the public nature of drama. It also discovers that the population of women in the field of playwriting in Nigeria is a far cry from that of the men, and behind those of women writing in other genres of literature, particularly the novel. The paper took a look at the various calls on women writers to correct the uncomplimentary image of women through their writing, and discovers that of the two pioneer female playwrights, only Tess Onwueme heeded that call, while Zulu Sofola's plays seem to ratify the traditional role of women.

Today we have, besides the two pioneers mentioned above, others such as Stella Oyedepo, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Chinyere Okafor, Onyeka Onyekuba-Iwuchukwu, Julie Okoh, Charity Angya, Catherine Acholonu, Osita Ezenwanebe, Bunmi Adeoye, Foluke Ogunleye, Akachi Ezigbo and the rest.

It is also discovered that uncomplimentary image of women in literature attracted a lot of criticism from gender sensitive critics, who seem to reach a consensus that only women can counter this negative image of women in literature. With quality education of women, therefore, the way was paved for women to venture into the literary field with the task of redeeming their image. However, it is observed that women writers, initially, were not quite able to rescue the female gender as expected as the image of doomed assertive women continued even in plays written by women. The difference is that though the heroines are brought to their knees but so, also, are the agents of their oppression and suppression.

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