

Constructing Gender: An exploration of Nigerian Men's Conceptualization of Masculinities in Modern Nigerian Drama

Akaenyi Nkiruka

*Department of Creative Arts,
University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria*

1.0 Introduction

The paper “Constructing Gender: An exploration of Nigerian Men's Conceptualization of Masculinities in Modern Nigerian Drama” examines the aspects of masculinities in modern African drama, the crisis it generates and how the crisis is resolved. Majority of studies on gender roles in the family has consistently found that men are not doing more in terms of domestic labor (despite the entry of large numbers of middle class women into the workplace), and there is little support for the intuitively expected premise that this inequality in household responsibilities would result in overt crisis in gender relations.

In this paper, the concept of masculinities encompasses actions, words, beliefs, postures and carriage meant to prove to the females that males are in-charge in all things. To understand the familial masculinity in the modern Nigerian families, first we need to have an understanding of modern Nigerian pattern of gender order. Historically, this pattern has been functioning through the overall subordination of women and dominance of men. Here, sex determines the roles and behaviours of individuals. Accordingly, values, customs and laws are based on sex differences, with men being the powerful and the dominant, and women being the weak and the subordinate. This pattern is still in force in many modern African societies, particularly Nigeria.

In this paper, however, the researcher has opted for John Remy's term; ‘androcracy’, which, I believe, better characterises the pattern of

gender order in Nigeria, and is more helpful in clarifying various representations of masculine domination and violence in this context. According to Remy (1990:43), androcracy, or 'rule by men' takes two forms: *patriarchy* (rule of the fathers), and *fratriarchy* (rule of the brotherhoods). Androcracy is fostered in a social system in which family is indeed an institution of male dominance, the most influential perhaps. As Connell (1995: 18) notes: "The authoritarian type [of masculinity] was a masculinity particularly involved in the maintenance of patriarchy: marked by hatred for homosexuals and contempt for women, as well as more general conformity to authority from above, and aggression towards the less powerful."

In this context, "conformity to authority from above", to adapt Connell's terms, means that senior men of a family have authority over everyone else in that family including younger men and women, who are in turn subject to forms of control and subordination (Moghadam, 1993: 104). Senior men, it is believed, make reasonable and rational decisions with the collective good of the kin in mind. So, other members must accept those decisions and carry them out.

The notion of 'senior men' must be put in the context of extended family in kinship-ordered society, where the subordination of women and domination of men are also linked to the reproduction of the kin group (Moghadam: 105). In extended family, there is no one single man as patriarch or *fratrist*, rather there are a number of male members, who exert their control as 'seniors' and/or 'elderly'. Arenas in which men deploy their dominating power over female members of the family are often related to women's economic status or their sexuality. Men decide, for instance, when it is appropriate for a woman to get married and to whom she should get married. Or, they decide whether it is appropriate that a female member of their family undertake a job outside the household.

Such familial 'strategy' is backed by socio-cultural dynamics of gender practice, by which men are entrusted with means of safeguarding family's social position through control over female members. Women are regarded as weak and emotional, and thus incapable of making any important decision on their own. It is

generally accepted that the most important capacity for women is to be good wives and mothers. Therefore, their activities must be confined, as much as possible, to the private/domestic sphere. Such debates on sex differences, mainly premised upon theories of biological dissimilarities between men and women, are conducive to the allocation of different roles in the family. The changes that have taken place in the technological and economic order of modern African societies have done little to erode the foundations of sex-biased pattern of the family.

Conceptualizations of Masculinity in Modern Nigerian Drama: A Emotional Repression

Patriarchy demands of men that they become and remain emotional cripples. In fact, Anger is the only form of emotion considered appropriate for males. Hence, the pressure to assume toughness has been taken for lack of care and affection and continuously breeds crisis in gender relations.

Irene Isoken Salami's *Sweet Revenge* (2004) captures the filial relationship of Sota and his wife, Aisosa. It represents the vicious imbalance in the relationship of man and wife, where the man occupies the whole gender space, private and public, leaving the wife to perch at whatever space is offered her. It is a drama of social justice; of virtues rewarded and vices punished. Sota leaves his wife, Aisosa and four children in Benin and traveled to England to complete his doctoral studies only to return with another wife, Cheryl, and throw Aisosa and the children out of his house despite her persevering suffering and devotion to him in his absence. Sota becomes rich and famous and decides to enjoy his wealth with his American wife. He says to Aisosa: "I have had enough. You can keep the children; find them another father if you wish. Please stay out of my path" (Salami 2004:27).

The male character Sota in Irene Isoken Salami's *Sweet Revenge* is unemotional. This is one of the qualities associated with being a man. He refuses to sympathize with his wife Aisosa when he returns to Nigeria. He humiliates Aisosa his wife, who faithfully, loyally, patiently and lovingly endures his absence for eight years when he

goes to pursue a doctorate degree abroad. He complains about everything; her cooking, her figure, her home management, and even the most intimate husband and wife bedroom acts:

SOTA: ...Of course, I have to complain. Things are not right here. Look at how lean the children are; see the tattered clothes they are in. Yes Look at the house too, bushy lawn, old shaky chairs, torn curtains.... I wonder how you live here... (P.15)

In the above scenario, we see that the man is listing out the duties which he has failed to do and wants to shift the blame to the woman. He does not blame her for failure in her duties as a mother and a wife in anyway. He refuses to see his own short-comings even when he is reminded:

AISOSA: You left here eight years ago for a Ph.D abroad, with the promise that you will give me money from your salary that was paid back home... Instead of the ₦40,000.00 monthly allowance you Promised us, all you made available to us was ₦10, 000.00...

SOTA: Yes, but ₦10,000.00 is a lot of money

AISOSA: yes, it is a lot of money to cater for four children, one househelp, your sister, pay school fees for children, maintain the house, care for your mother, pay the doctors and other bills. (16)

He becomes a senator and throws out Aisosa his wife and their four children. He takes over the house she built with her inheritance money. The reason for this act of injustice and ingratitude? “she does not befit my status” says Sota. Joseph Mbachu says that “this is the typical behavior of the Nigerian male in the traditional setting. When he is elevated, he kicks out the good old wife. Many women have been discarded like pieces of old rags by their men because they now are below the new status of their husbands” They are kicked out along

with their children. Such women are left to suffer emotional stress and anguish.

Sota's behavior towards the women's delegates of the constituency is not only arrogant but snobbish. He refuses to welcome them into his house, and orders their arrest and detention for trespassing; the very women that organize, mobilize, campaign and vote massively for him. Nosa's caution that the same women "can pull the carpet off your feet" elicits a pompous dismissal:

SOTA: They won't dare. What can women do in Nigerian politics?

NOSA: You are a J.J.C. The women have become very powerful over the years. They are a strong political force now, even though we fail to acknowledge it.

SOTA: Really? They can't do anything. The men are still in charge. (20)

Sota's attitude depicts adequately Van Allen's (1970) submission that: "the contemporary patriarchal organization with its new structure of male empowerment in education and politics gave the male added prominence and power and exacerbated the woman's problem by pushing her further down the valley of subordination." Unfortunately, his viciousness catches up with him and he lost every thing; Cheryl, Senatorial seat, his home, his job, and he becomes a destitute while Aisosa goes up; through hard work, and with the help of a couple Ede and Nosa, she gets a job, wins the Senatorial Seat of Sota, becomes a Senate President and crowned all by many awards of excellence.

Possessiveness

Masculinity is seen in some African cultures in terms of the man's acquisition of several property including wives. This practice is usually to the detriment of the female gender, since she is denied any right or freedom that she wants to claim as a human being. It is always believed that the payment of the bride-price by the man gives him an absolute control over the woman and her possessions as well. Modern

experience shows that this common practice brings about inequality in gender relations. Possessiveness and Jealousy play important roles in the conflicts and arguments associated with crisis in gender relations. In African society, women are seen, and even portrayed in art as men's property.

Nneora: Another Doll's House by Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh is a version of Henrik Ibsen's masterpiece *A Doll's House* adapted for an African setting. This adaptation has been facilitated by some similarities which exist between African and Norwegian societies. Such similarities are found in the areas of the social values which underpin gender roles.

Most of the play's analysis of masculinity devolves on the unlovely character of Ikenna, who not only represents the working and effects of traditional gender ideology, but also he articulates its precepts. He knows what true manliness should entail, as he makes clear through his actions throughout the play. The dramatic action is set in motion in his encounter with Nneora. In *Nneora: an African Doll's House*, Ikenna comes home from work and sees a pair of man's shoes under a chair in the sitting room. Ignorant of the fact that it is his birthday present from his wife, he suspects infidelity and thunders "What is this shoe doing in my sitting room? Who owns it? ... Just tell me how a man's shoe got into my sitting room" (p. 29). As soon as he learns that the shoe is a surprise birthday gift from his wife, he laughs to cover the awkwardness of the moment.

Nneora the eponymous heroine in the play, has to sell all her goods, closed down her cloth boutique to make up the flight ticket for his successful treatment abroad. When in one of their discussions, Nneora tries to show an understanding of his hectic schedule as a bank executive by comparing it with her then cloth trade, Ikenna thunders: "Your shop! There you go again Nneora. How can you compare a shack in the market with my executive position in a merchant bank?" (p. 32). Manliness abhors any form of comparison or any reasoning that brings a man on par with a woman, especially his own wife. When Nneora regrets having closed her shop to become a fulltime housewife, Ikenna insists she is part of his

possession in the following words, “Now, I own you. You are solely mine; shop, body and soul... even your feelings belong to me. Don’t you understand? I want to have you to myself. I don’t want to share you with anybody including your customers”(32).

The patriarchal attitude of male possessiveness prefers that women depend entirely on men. Nneora simply loses her freedom and rights by closing down her shop, becoming entirely dependent on Ikenna. Elsewhere, he lectures Nneora about what it is to be a ‘real man’. In order to raise some money for her husband’s treatment abroad, Nneora agrees to sleep with Osita Nonso so as to make him approve the money for her husband’s treatment though she never means to honor it. When Ikenna finds out about the bargain, he refuses to listen to her explanation, forgets instantly all her help and goodness and calls her horrible names. After discovering that Osita no longer intends to persecute them, he snaps into the role of a protector:

IKENNA: You loved me as a wife should love her husband. It was just that you did not have a proper grasp of the situation. But do you imagine that you are any less dear to me for making few mistakes out of necessity. **I shouldn’t be a proper man if your feminine helplessness did not make you twice as attractive to me. You must forget all the hard things that I said to you in that first dreadful moment when it seemed as if the whole world is falling about my ears. I have forgiven you. (Emphasis mine)**

The ‘proper man’ takes pleasure in his wife’s helplessness, for it ensures his own role as a protector. The ‘real man’ takes an almost religious pleasure in forgiveness because it makes his wife ‘his property in a double sense’. There is something deeply chilling about Ikenna’s joyful re-assurances. What makes Nneora decide to leave Ikenna? Because he fails to live up to the model of

masculinity which he has constructed for himself and which his wife has projected onto him. But the play undermines Ikenna, and masculine ideology, at a deeper level than this. His masculine gender role was dismantled much earlier in the play. Nneora's 'naïve persona,' that of a 'spendthrift wife,' has blinded him to the fact that actually he is the doll in the *Doll's House* every bit as much as she is. When the crisis is over, he acts quickly to restore the status-quo, but the oppressive paternalism to which he lays claim is no longer available to him: his mean-spiritedness sees to that. Not only that, but their symbiotic role-playing has blinded him to a larger truth: that within the doll's house the gender roles have actually been reversed all along. His wife has been the true provider and the rescuer from the start-literally so since she saves his life. She plays the chivalric role of self-sacrificing protector which he could not emulate. He, on the other hand, stands in the constant need of protection. Nneora had protected Ikenna from the knowledge of the manner in which she was able to procure the job for him as a clerk in the bank. For the first time, it dawns on Nneora that she has been living a borrowed life; a life to please the society, and she takes the decision to embark on the painful journey of self discovery without her husband.

The gender ideology by which Ikenna lives is an illusion: it is not just that a single moment of weakness brings it crashing down about his ears. Rather, it is that the masculine authority in which he believes is one he never possessed in the first place. At the end of the play he can no longer even lay claim to the illusion of his authority. Nor does he have as Nneora sees, the ability to change in order to adjust to new perceptions. The fissure is too big for that. Underpinning the ending of the play is a classic liberal feminist proposition that patriarchy damages men as well as women. The doll-house marriage has impoverished Ikenna as well as (though not nearly as much as) Nneora. Well though it worked for him on a number of levels, it has also cut him off from all those aspects of Nneora which are most valuable and alive. And if the disease affects them both, so does the cure. When Ikenna, beginning to understand the fixity of Nneora's purpose, pleads:

IKENNA: Nneora, please don't leave. I will make all these things up to you. I will do anything you want me to do. I will even apologize if you want me to. Don't be so resolute.

NNEORA: It is already too late, stranger (p.124-125)

The theme of masculinity is repeated in the figure of Osita Nonso, one of the male characters in Tracie Utoh – Ezeajugh's *Nneora: an African Doll's House*. When he was a bank clerk, he impregnated a teenage girl, Linda, who was in secondary school, and he was forced to marry her. Linda has three children for him. But when Osita Nonso rises to the position of a bank manager, he turns a tiger and continually harasses Linda until she escapes to the US with her children. At one of the dreadful nights dramatized in the play, he comes home with a prostitute for the night and commands Linda to prepare food for her. When Linda refuses to be turned into the slave of a prostitute in her own house, Osita reminds her of his might as he say: "I can see that you are hungry for my fists ... I can see that you want your regular doses this night", and he removes his belt and begins to flog her in front of the prostitute (2005: 67, 68).

One of the recurrent myths of masculinity in Africa is the need for completion through paternity, completion through the love of a good woman. Osita Nonso stands on the brink of losing all of these, but Ezeajugh contrives a sentimental ending by which all are restored to him, and he and Linda with their children are left to redeem each other. Hence, as we have seen so far, the ego of ownership constitutes a site for conflict in gender relations.

Playing the Super Rational Being:

Barclays Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave* dramatizes the consequent effect of disregarding women's opinion in decision-making. It is set in a rural town of Toru-Ama in the Izon region of Nigeria.

Dance on His Grave is an anti-war melodrama that tells the story of a sex/domestic strike embarked upon by the women of Toru-Ama over two controversial issues- to make the men call off the proposed

invasion of Angiama and to make the men define a place for women in the affairs of the land. As usual, the men underestimate the resolve of women and resort to violence.

The battle line is drawn. However, King Olotu, the Akpobirisi of Toru-Ama, finds out too late that Queen Alaere is willing to play to the gallery to retain the upper hand in the gender-ridden confrontation. He discovers to his dismay that the Queen questions his (Olotu's) rights over their only daughter, Beke. This is equally compounded by the pre-existing doubts over the true paternity of the child in the royal family. Finally, as Olotu laments his ill-luck and lack of judgment in starting a fight with women, he resolves to 'find solace in silence'.

King Olotu, the male protagonist in the play is a typical representation of the patriarchal order. He believes that women are 'egg-heads' and should not be given the privilege to make decisions affecting the state. In one of his dreadful encounters with Alaere as dramatized in the play, he makes this obvious to his wife:

Olotu: (*Pushing her away from the throne*) Now, woman, stop making fun of state affairs. You think these matters are for egg-heads?

As Olotu's words clearly imply, the traditional world of intellect is mainly the prerogative of men. The crux of the play is entrenched in a social order that would not hear of a woman being intelligent. Earlier, he says that an attempt by women to wear "thinking caps" will only leave them with bald head. This is the reason for a flagrant disregard of their opinions in decision-making. The women of Toru-Ama desire equality with their male counterparts, "adequate representation" in Alaere's words.

However, Alaere, the king's wife and the leader of the women in *Dance on his Grave* refuses to accept defeat. She puts forward to Olotu another demand; that she be allowed to have a say in the upbringing of their daughter, Beke. In his usually, uncompromising manner, King Olotu stoutly refuses: " I know my rights and I will have them! I have the final say as the head of this family! I'll have no

one, woman or child, encroaching on my rights” (27). Alaere prods him further in a bid to assert her rights. “You are not here to reason, woman!, he says, I didn’t pay all that bride price on your head for you to come here and reason for me! I do all the reasoning for you and every other person in this house! No more of that rubbish in my palace! (25).

Finally, Alaere employs a means specifically directed at her husband, the symbol of women subjugation in order to win the gender war. It is a psychological strategy which August Strindberg has identified and is exemplified in his play *The Father*. Alaere’s subsequent speech implies that King Olotu may not be the real father of Beke after all. As Olotu groans under the agony of the thought, Alaere adds another frightful idea of his insanity, which she claims, could give her opportunity to dethrone him and enthrone her daughter, Beke. Full of anger and confusion, Olotu makes a last show of his physical power, pounces on Alaere and tries to strangulate her. Unfortunately, his strength fails to crush the psychological strategy as Beke’s words: “ I hate you..! You are not my father... if you can treat mother like this, then you are not my father” (62) seals his case and forces him into despair. King Olotu goes under; he is crushed just as he crushes the women up rising with caning. At last, he drinks poison and dies. The war is disastrous and tragic in *Dance on his Grave*. Modern experience has proved the belief in man’s rationality as shallow and unfounded; still men hold on to it, playing the super rational being and causing crisis in gender relations.

Violent Masculinity

As boys, men are socialized on the need to distinguish themselves from the female gender by being violent. Physical violence was seen a gendered activity, specifically masculine activity. This is because of the role of man as a provider and a protector in his home and outside of it. He is expected to become a warlord in order to defend his community during the times of warfare, and as well provide for his family through his hunting and wrestling expeditions. However, men always display their physical power in the family where they feel there are no consequences for their action. The inordinate display of

physical power is seen often in the different forms of physical violence on the female gender, especially, wives. These include beating, boxing, flogging, dragging on the floor and several other forms of physical abuse and violation which brings about crisis in gender relations.

Altine's Wrath by Femi Osofisan is a work which depicts the social oppression against women in which the sanctity of marriage is violated and a husband murders a wife in collaboration with outsiders. Lawal's vicious act of wife-battery and subjugation is accompanied by name-calling, a form of psychological violence. On one of the dreadful nights dramatized in the play, Lawal's mistress visits his home. Mariam's visit to his matrimonial home is used by the playwright to accentuate Altine's state of subjection:

LAWAL: Why are you staring there like an idiot?
The least you can do is say good evening to her? Go on. Greet her. (Altine stares, silent, Lawal angrily hits her) I say greet her, You dumb female goat. Down on your knees! (*Altine falls and crawls as he kicks her. She drools in the mouth.*) (54)

At another instance in the play, Lawal exhibits a negative masculinity when he mercilessly flogs Altine:

LAWAL: ...you broke it! I will teach you a lesson!
(*He takes out a belt and whips her. She falls on her knees but takes the blows without even trying to protect herself. He hits her again with the woman only staring*)

LAWAL: And her eyes just now! Did you see her eyes?

MARIAM: What's wrong with her eyes?

LAWAL: The way they stared! Not a cry! Not a word. She just looked at me.

MARIAM: I say forget it! Why should her crying or not bother you? You are not a sadist are you?
(P.59)

Mariam's response as to whether Lawal is a sadist, which is a relevant question draws our attention to the pathological character of the violence which Lawal inflicts on his wife. This violence is so brutal that one wonders what Altine could have done to warrant such an inhuman treatment. The degree of Lawal's battery and humiliation of Altine, even in the presence of his mistress, and his treatment of Altine like an animal, "a dumb female goat", forces the reader to recognize Lawal as a sadist who derives pleasure from reducing his wife to the status of sub-human, to a state of bondage often encountered with a slave. The drive for this brutalization springs from Lawal's urge to dominate.

This destructive desire of Lawal to dominate does not manifest itself only at the physical level of brutalization but also at the verbal level. His physical assertion of domination and subjection which is seen in the infliction of bodily injury on Altine is thus accompanied by the most brutal form of verbal abuse which conceives of Altine in terms of animals or inanimate objects. She is thus "a goat", "an animal", "a complete dumb lot" who is as dumb as a "chair". In this act of sadism, Lawal denies his wife the right to have a mind as a human individual. Fromm says:

The aim of sadism is to transform man into a thing, something animate into something inanimate, since by complete and absolute control the living loses one's essential quality of life-freedom. (39)

This is obviously Lawal's aim in the play, to transform his wife into an object through absolute bondage, to exercise domination over her in such a way as to deny her freedom.

The above scenario captures a social context where aggressive sexual and violent behavior is considered as proof that someone is a "real man". In Africa, the man is expected to be sexually aware unlike his female counterpart who must remain passive or face the dire

consequences and shame. He can sleep around with as many women as possible, holding claims to the traditional culture of polygamy. This is the reason for the lack of seriousness that male infidelity in marriage attracts, but even suspected female infidelity attracts severe penalties and sanctions in society. Mary Kolawole rightly observes that “the question of the position of women in society is hinged on how much power they have compared to men as members of the same society”. It is a typical example of the society that Lawal has in mind when he says:

Lawal: Rotten! Let me tell you. JJC! Either you get back where you’re coming from or learn to shut your mouth! Instead of saying all that rubbish! You’re in the wrong country, let me tell you! You and your type, you have no place here! **Women here don’t dare raise their voice where men are speaking! You’d better get that into your head (emphasis mine)**

In Nigeria as in other African countries, many women are battered in their homes. Many people accept it as part of married life while few who know it is not are helpless because wife battering is still seen as a family dispute which is outside the concern of the law enforcement agents. Altine represents several women who are subjected to terrible abuses in the family. She says:

Altine: Yes, my name is Altine, master. You bought me nine years ago, remember? I was just a slave whom my father had put in the market for the highest bidder, you remember? So you bought me to bear your children and scrub your floor, and wash your clothes. I cook your meals, and howl meekly when you exercise your lungs by barking. Or when it’s your muscles you feel like testing, I lay down meekly and take blows. Look at me; the memory of slavery are here in this bundle...

Both men and society strive to ensure the continuity of female exploitation and enslavement by subjecting Altine to both psychological and physical torture in the hands of an insensitive husband. First, it was her father who forcefully ‘sold’ her off in marriage to Lawal without giving due considerations for her feelings. Then, Lawal, her husband inflicts body injuries upon her at will. Yet Altine’s choice of confrontation against the plan even in the face of difficulties or hardship shows how determined she is to reverse the conventional norms. From the feminist point of view, her decision not to conform to patriarchy, which inspires her tough battle for freedom, is a necessary attribute of contemporary women. For Osofisan, her choice is the major way to tear down the boundaries that hinder and marginalize women in society. The men, on the other hand, view Altine’s sudden refusal to endure and remain silent in the face of oppression as an aberration, a form of cultural contamination and above all, a form of folly or neurosis. Lawal concludes that she has completely gone crazy. Osofisan does not stop at dramatizing the theme of domestic violence; he extols the need for women to speak out against domestic violence. Altine’s reaction to her state of subjection in Lawal’s house is a fierce outcry against social oppression that deteriorates the self-worth and dignity of women. Lawal wonders how the sudden transformation of his ‘dumb’ wife has taken place:

Lawal: vocal...! Vocal...! Alhaji, help me I’m mad already! My head is on fire! Altine who taught you all these? Who taught you to speak? And then...help me...! Your voice, where did you find your voice? When did you...Miriam! Miriam! Look for me, its Altine isn’t it? (30)

The playwright uses the scenario to illustrate that education is the best way that women can achieve a kind of self-possession that would guarantee genuine equality or partnership with men. Altine enrolls for adult education classes, an attempt to fight oppression in all its ramifications, and gain total liberation. Education gives her the power of utterance.

Collective action by women

Dance on His Grave by Barclays Ayakoroma is a play that examines the reversal in gender role in a changing modern Nigerian society. Erhuwaren community is a post-colonial town where western values have made an impact in the lives of the people. The characters in the play live a more communal, traditional life as the impact of modernity is generally less felt in the villages than in urban cities. Hence, the women in this community make use of the provisions in traditional culture in resisting the oppression of their gender. They know what it means to be a woman in their society. Though women rarely enjoyed direct political power in traditional African society, there are subtle ways in which they express their opinions and hence make their impact felt especially in matters affecting their lives. For example, there are women groups that champion women's rights and they have influence on men and decision-making. Gender experts and scholars agree that the complete disregard of women's opinion is an effect of colonial experience. This is the issue in *Dance on His Grave* where the council of elders goes into a closed session to make a decision on state affairs affecting the citizens, including women.

Dance on His Grave by Barclays Ayakoroma is set in a rural village of Toru-Ama in modern Nigeria. The motive for the war on the part of the men of Toru-Ama goes beyond the incidence of female abduction and encompasses nationalism. The men of Toru-Ama reason that if they do not respond to the current issue of the abduction of one of their daughters, the men of Angiama would take their inaction as a sign of weakness within the body politic of Toru-Ama and they may, encouraged by this sign of weakness, lay claim to the ancestral lands, ponds and lakes of Toru-Ama. The womenfolk sees the declaration of war on account of the incidence is taking the matter too far. They also reason that during the war it is their sons who would be sacrificed, not the elderly members of the council of Chiefs presided over by King Olotu. The women are therefore asking that their views be taken into consideration in serious matters bordering on state security because it is their sons who are made the canon fodder in war theatres. Of course, male chauvinistic pride and arrogance prevent the men-folk of Toru-Ama from reasoning with the womenfolk.

Consequently, the women en-masse employ three strategies to protest the oppression and marginalization. Firstly, the women embark on a “sex strike” to protest the male authority. Secondly, they abandoned their social responsibilities which include sweeping, washing, cooking, minding the children and sex. There is crisis in every home and in the community as the men are in disarray, homes are dirty. The men are divided in their personal attitude towards the crisis. Male ego complicates and nourishes gender crisis. To worsen the crisis, King Olotu and the men of the town council resort to the use of violence by ‘flogging sense’ into the heads of the women. The law also empowers the men to flog their wives into submission to satisfy their sexual urges. This law is a punitive measure on the women because they embark on a strike in protest against the proposed invasion of Angiama.

Personal or Individualistic Action

In *Nneora: Another Doll's House*, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh dramatizes a form of individualistic action in form of a walkout in which women take a decision never to bear the oppression any longer and hence walk out on their husbands or get separated from them. The prevalence of this form is high in urban cities. In *Nneora, an African Doll's House* as in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the female protagonist, Nneora, plays the good wife until she can no longer bear the yoke of oppression by her husband.

Nneora had her first encounter with Ikenna who is a jobless lawyer, where he is being embarrassed by one of his creditors. Nneora pays his debt, and even gives him some money. She secures a job for him in a merchant bank through the help of her former lover, Osita Nonso, when they eventually marry. Nneora is a typical representative of women's biological nature; she is loving, caring, kind and generous. Ikenna says to her “You embody the best combination I have ever seen in a woman; exquisite beauty and a large heart” (p. 17-18). After they get married, he commends her effort: “I like the way you take care of the house” (10). This draws the line between a career woman and house wife (30). Ikenna's assertion or statement shows his intrinsic flair for women's subjugation. He prefers the way Nneora closes down her shop so that it will give him an opportunity to oppress her in

finance-related matters. Nneora finally decides to leave her matrimonial home, declaring:

My freedom starts this night ... I will re-organize myself. I will re-open my shop; from the proceeds, I will train my children and above all, I will teach them true love. Then ... there is another task I must accomplish... I must go back to school and struggle on, until I get a degree .

The point of divergence between her action and that of Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is Nneora's disposition towards her children, whom she cannot afford to leave behind. Hence, she decides to leave with her children while Nora, a western lady, slams the door against them all – husband and children.

Irene Salami-Agunloye in *Sweet Revenge* dramatizes the need for women to choose whether to remain subordinated or liberate themselves in the face of oppression. The female heroine, Aisosa, says that: "Our lives are a result of the choices we make in life" (83). It is noteworthy that choice in this context simply means having the will or power to act and initiate change in the status of women or to maintain the status quo. The choice is made out of intense and often prolonged oppression of women and their realization of its excruciating effects on them. Feminist playwrights have emphasized the role of consciousness-raising and empowerment of women as viable means of equipping women with the power to choose to act. Aisosa in *Sweet Revenge* is educationally empowered to triumph over her husband's viciousness through the choices she makes at every critical stage of the struggle.

Femi Osofisan in *Altine's Wrath* advocates the need to start revolution at the self-level. Thus, he preaches emancipation from 'mental slavery' a philosophy propagated by the late Bob Marley. The story of Altine represents several women who are subjected to terrible abuses in the family. The play suggests routes to individual success and ultimately the goal of female emancipation. Osofisan depicts in the play the steps a woman has to take, the hurdles she has to cross to

achieve a kind of self-possession that would guarantee genuine equality with men.

Gender scholars have noted that this collective action is testimony to female powerlessness as persons or individuals. Educationally empowered women, who are well-disposed to confronting oppression are less prone to collective action in filial dispute. Salami rightly observes that “collective action is more common in Africa than in the western world because of the peculiarity of African women’s experience”(2005:432) In Ayakorama’s *Dance...the women of Toru-Ama*, however are not educationally empowered and rely on the power of communal action. The two women leaders, Erebu and Alaere, move the women to action through consciousness-raising:

Good women of Toru-Ama. You are all witnesses to what has been happening in this land. Women are relegated to the background in the affairs of the land....Should we not be consulted even in matters concerning our children and us? Are we only to raise children and prepare meals for our husbands? Wash their cloths and not argue? We are going to adopt serious measures to force the men to grant our request to have a say in the affairs of the land. (2002: p.3)

The men in both plays rise in defiance against the women’s decision and since both parties are ready for action, they seek further strategies.

Conclusion

The playwrights show their displeasure with the level of acrimony that characterizes gender relations in modern society. In all the plays, gender crisis is seen as a phenomenon that hampers development in modern society. Hence, there is urgent need for a change in the traditional family. The playwrights advocate the need for women empowerment through education. This will bring about a change in the status of women in society and ensure gender equality.

The findings reveal that the plays lay emphasis on the preservation of African traditional family rather than its disintegration. This is because of the recognition of the family as the nucleus of the people’s

communal life. The resolution in *Nneora: another Doll's House* by Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh is most tactical. The African female playwright cannot afford to dramatize the break-up of African traditional family no matter how obsolete its traditional practices are. Hence, though the audience watches Nneora take the decision to leave the house with her children, they never watch her leave. Rather, she goes into the bedroom after stating one condition on which she can stay back: that of change, "Both of us would have to be so changed that our life together could be a real marriage" (125). This, she says, is the greatest miracle. Though Ikenna is devastated and slumps into the chair when Nneora goes into the room, he suddenly remembers and considers "the greatest miracle of all ...?". This open-endedness suggests the possibility that Ikenna may change and hence the miracle may happen after all. Henrik Ibsen, in *A Doll's House*, can afford to dramatize before the audience a woman who walks out on her husband, symbolized by the slamming of the door to indicate finality. But in Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House* the note of finality is removed. Before Nneora walks out on her husband, she leaves the possibility of reconciliation in "the greatest miracles" in which the two have to be so changed that their life together could be a real miracle as an option that Ikenna is shown contemplating its possibility as light fades. Divorce is a formal dissolution of marriage through court proceedings and it is not a common strategy for conflict resolution in African drama.

Irene Salami is another female playwright concerned about the reformation of the African family instead of its complete disintegration. Despite all odds, Aisosa, the heroine in *Sweet Revenge* decides to remain with her husband. It is her husband, Sota, who suggests divorce to her in order to move in with his new wife, Cheryl. In this way, Irene Salami Agunloye realizes the audience's potential sympathy for her.

In *Dance on his Grave* the refusal of the men to consider, the women's request fuels the gender war and results to different types of strategies, some of which are very fatal. King Olotu, the king of Toru-Ama in *Dance on his Grave* insists that "for a wife to have a say means there are two masters or captains in this house". The women's request is

seen as an abomination. “Do they want to husband us?” asked Chief Apodi. “This is unheard of. women wanting to put on thinking cap!” he added. “It is utter rubbish! They think taking care of the affairs of this land is the same as haggling in the Zarama market?” asked Chief Osima. For Olotu, the symbol of male ego in the play, such a thought is not realizable since as the saying goes Two rams cannot drink from one pot at the same time! They will surely lock horns! ⁸ and horns they eventually locked. King Olotu in *Dance on His Grave* decides to die than witness the break-up of his family.

Altine’s Wrath by Femi Osofisan dramatizes the plight of women in a male-dominated society especially when they are not educationally empowered and therefore economically dependent. Altine suffers both physical and psychological abuse in the hands of Lawal, her husband and his mistress, Mariam, until she decides to liberate herself. Towards the end of the play, there is a suggestion on the possibility of Lawal becoming a changed man, following Altine’s threat to disappear from her matrimonial home, but for Maikudi’s vicious intervention in the domestic squabble. Eventually, Altine is murdered by the criminal duo in order to silence Altine permanently. In all the plays, formal education is presented as central to women liberation and a sure way of changing their position in society.

Works Cited

- Allen, V. (1970) “Aba Riots or Igbo Women’s War: Ideology, stratification and invisibility of women” in Nancy and Bay(eds) *Africa studies in social and economic Change*. Stratford: California State University.
- Ayakoroma, Barclays. (2002) *Dance on His Grave*. Yenogoa: Dee-Goldfinger Publishers.
- Balogun, A.O. (1999) “Gender Crisis in Yoruba Thought, an Aftermath of Western Experience”. *Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (pp. 97 – 106)
- Connell, R. (1995) *Masculinities*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Fromm, E. *The Heart of Man*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Irobi, E. (2007) “Feminist Aesthetics in African theatre of Colonial Period”. *African Performance Review* Vol.1. Nos. 2&3, London: Adonis and Abbey: A Journal Publication of Drama

- Department, Goldsmith College, University of London. (pp. 56 – 74).
- Kolawole, M. (1999)“Self-Representation and the dynamics of Culture and Power in Women’s Writing”. *Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol.1 No. 1, (Pp. 1—10).
- Millet, K. (1960) *Sexual Politics: Women in Society*. London: Methuen.
- Moghadam, V. (1993) *Modernizing women, gender and social change in the middle east*. London: Lynne Reinner
- Osofisan, F. (1964) *Altine’s Wrath in Seasons of Wrath*. Ibadan: Opon Ifa Readers.
- Remy, J. (1990). ‘Patriarchy and fratirchy as forms of androcacy’ in Hearn, J.& Morgan, D (eds), *Men, masculinities and social theory*. London:Unwin Hyman, pp43-54.
- Salami, I. (2005) “Female Consciousness and Collective Action. *The Wives’ Revolt and More Than Dancing*”. *Nigerian Theatre Journal* vol.8. Nos. 1&2, (pp. 422 – 432).
- Salami, Irene Isoken (2004), *Sweet Revenge* Jos: Saniez Publications. Print.
- Utoh-Ezeajugh, T. (2005) *Nneora: an African Doll’s House*. Awka: valid Publishing Co.
- Weber, M. (1920) *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Germany: A M Hendersons and Talcot Parsons.