

## FEMALE SPACE AND IDENTITY CHALLENGES IN NIGERIAN DRAMA: A STUDY OF AMIRIKPA OYIGBENU'S TOWN HALL WHISPERS AND JONATHAN MBACHAGA'S WIDOWS' MIGHT

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### Abstract

Feminist Theater is a reaction against patriarchal values that are used to undermine and disempower women in the society. Its aim is to combat negative trends through which the female gender has been dominated, marginalized and dehumanized. As such, gender advocates have challenged patriarchal norms through the representation of strong, vibrant, resilient, and unflattering female characters who are anxious to break-free from cultural oppression and expand their scope beyond the space allotted them by the society. It is on this backdrop that the paper sets out to amplify the role of Feminist Theater in redressing the debased status of women in Nigerian society. Using the Social Feminists Theory as a paradigm to analyze the selected plays, *Town Hall Whispers* by Amirikpa Oyigbenu and *Widows Might* by Jonathan Mbachaga. The study found that women are aggrievedly subjugated in society and recommends that the, position of the female space should be redefined to accommodate women contributing their unique skills to nation-building.

### Introduction

The identity of women in Nigeria and, by extension, Africa is often perceived to be that of the wife, mother, and caregiver; hence, they are expected to function within these social constructs. As a result, women tend to play second fiddles and remain subordinates to their male counterparts. This structure thus permits, the male gender to manipulate power to their advantage by attributing myths about sociocultural, political, and economic barriers that weaken, undermine, and hamper the exhibition of the female ability and dreams. Thus, women's marginalization, oppression, relegation, and discrimination in various spheres of society spurred feminist ideologies to infiltrate in the theater purview. Many of them seek to re-evaluate and question these cultural myths with the intention of breaking the barriers surrounding the activities that inhibit women from realizing their full potential as it affects the development of the Nigerian society.

### Conceptualizing Female Space

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Significantly, for the purpose of this paper, the concept of female space relates to the position both physical and psychological boundaries set for the womanhood in the society, especially in the African experience. It also connotes the unbiased outlook of the woman toward participating in the socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and religion-cultural dispositions of society. Iniobong Uko's Gender and Identity, cited in the Works of Osonye Tess Onwueme (xiv), describes the female space in Africa as inadequate. She sees the concept of female space in Africa as "one limiting women's self-expression, because the girl-child is conditioned to believe and accept that her space is always adequate and that she should adjust her activities to fit in the space rather than seek to expand the scope in which she finds herself." The argument on female space in African society is considered from the perspective of the entrapment of women's rights by tradition and limiting them to the compliance of patriarchal values of the given society, thus confining women within the structure of mere marriage and motherhood. Women's everyday experience of patriarchy and attempts to expand the female space incur repercussions, while compliance with these patriarchal values is lauded as a noble act (Naomi Nkealah 53).

The foregoing implies that, traditionally, women are constrained and compelled to live within boundaries and, most often, unpleasant situations, created by the "wife" status. These conditions inhibit their personal growth, let alone contributing to societal development. Women are resilient and can contribute meaningfully to their communities.

However, these stereotypes are debunked in a BBC documentary that relays the story of Sisa, an Egyptian woman. Sisa desperately needed a job in a society where women were expected to remain at home, and so she had to change her identity to that of a man to enable her to get a job to feed her family. At that time in Egypt, all the jobs were done by men, but Sisa, who had lost her husband and no one else to help her out, had to disguise as a man to enable her to feed and raise her daughter. She cut off her hair, removed her feminine clothes, changed her voice, put on men's clothes, and started working really tough jobs on construction sites and cobbler shops. These jobs she did every day for 43 years. Ironically, Sisa's daughter grew up calling her a "Dad", when in reality, she was a mother who only 'borrowed' a man's identity just to raise her. Sisa however, became stronger than most men both physically and mentally after decades of suffering in silence until she was noticed and honored as "The Ideal Fighting Mother" by the president of Egypt in 2015.

Sisa's story, as documented by the BBC, succinctly exemplifies the typical situation of the female space in many African societies. This, however, becomes the objective of feminist theories that have fervently sought to redeem the identity challenge of women and likewise, expand the Female Space.

### **What is Identity Challenge?**

Identity challenge bothers on the perception of the self and the uncertainty that comes with the denial of self-fulfillment of a person. This could also mean uncertainty of class acceptance, assumption of responsibility, and fitting into social constructs. According to Michael Hogg and Deborah Terry (121), identity itself "is a structure and function relating to behavioral roles people play in the society." They note that identity, is the social nature of self -steaming from the roles or position a person occupies and varies from person to group members and can be negotiated, co-created and reinforced." The concept of identity challenge as engaged in this discourse, however, encompasses gender constructs and roles assigned to both men and women and their implications for the female gender. This is because the, cultural roles assigned to women often leave them at the receiving end compared their male counterparts. Roles that require women to change their names to take up that of their husband's, their belief (religion), and cultural values, and sometimes, giving up on personal relations. This leads women to exist solely on the identities and expectations of their husbands and society; they have no dream of their own and, by chance, in cases of uncertainties they become lost and powerless. In fact, traditional expectations

may require a woman to be accorded respect only when she is married. Based on this argument, the submission above could be used as yardstick for women emancipation, as used by Feminist theories.

### **Feminism as a Tool for Redeeming Female Space in Nigeria**

The concept of Feminism is rooted in the social, economic, and political equality of the sexes. The wave formally began at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, when 300 men and women rallied to the cause of equality for women. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1902) drafted the Seneca Falls Declaration, outlining the new movement's ideology and political strategies (Pacific University, Oregon). Thus, Feminism has manifested worldwide and through various Feminist approaches, to redress the challenges of women and children, particularly girls and children, their rights and interests in any given society. According to Charity Angya (5), feminism is a "struggle to articulate women's vision of what a desirable society would mean for them ranging in practical terms from issues relating to unequal access of women to resources, harmful traditional practices, and gender inequality."

The themes explored by feminist critiques include; discrimination stereotypes, objectification, oppression, and patriarchy. Norris Pippa submits that the continued dominance of women by men has led to the rise of different theories and approaches to feminism. He posits that, "Feminists agree that there is a deep rooted social, economic and political inequalities between the sexes which need to be changed, but they fundamentally disagree in their analysis of why this situation has to come and how far it should be altered" (29).

The disagreement as underscored in the submission above stems from a place of perspective; how a particular group views feminism and the approaches to which they proceed with harmonizing the gender equity question. As a result, different Feminist theories have unique approaches and dimensions to the question of equality.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The socialist approach connects the oppression of women to Marxist Capitalist ideology about exploitation, oppression, and labor. Socialist feminism can be traced to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 and William Thomson's Utopian socialist work in the 1800s.

Socialist Feminists view capitalism as the foundation of patriarchy and advocate for full economic equality in the socialist society. They argue that women's liberation can only be achieved by working to end economic and cultural sources of oppression. Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, and Hillary Wainwrights, in their work titled "Beyond the Fragments" (1979), give a vivid account of the difficulties faced by women who dare to work in male-dominated organizations. Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" (1949), also emphasizes how socialism can lead to the liberation of women and the development of society in general. Socialists focus their energies on far-reaching changes that affect society as a whole order than on an individual basis. Their solution to women's questions is to liberate women from the private functions of wife, mother, and home-caterer and make them public workers in the social economy.

The theoretical framework provided in this study underscores the fact that women have been marginalized, subjugated, discriminated upon, dominated, and relegated to the background by the existing systems in the society, which serve as bottlenecks and infringement on the rights as well the development of women as demonstrated in the plays *Town Hall Whispers* by Amirikpa Oyigbenu and *Widows' Might* by Jonathan Mbachaga, used herein as paradigms for analyses.

### **Synopsis of *Town Hall Whispers***

A community is agitated as hardship hits the citizens because of gross leadership. The rumor is that the king-making process was truncated. The chief priest is not a fan of the king, nor is he willing to participate in their hypocrisy, as he remained indifferent in the chaos of the community. The elders of the town are concerned as

lamentation piles up. The children resigned to the love of stories and lessons they receive from an old woman at dusk. The old Woman becomes a symbol of hope and authority for the young ones who anxiously wait for moonlight to listen to her lessons every day. The king is unsettled; his nights are unusually long and filled with nightmares as the youths of his kingdom are held captive in the bush. With a deafening silence from the king and elders of the land to the disappearance of the boys, the women had to form a team to save their children from being lavished in abandonment. The women began their protest by identifying food blockage. However, in a rather desperate but determined move, the female leader convinced the king's wives and other women to match the Forest Mountains to rescue their youths.

### ***Analysis of Town Hall Whispers***

Set in a contemporary Nigerian society, the play centers on corruption, gross governance deficiency, and a leadership crisis, and the attempt by the women of the community to resist absolute male domination, especially at the instance of gross failure, maladministration, and a break in constitutional duty. The call by the Women Leader to rescue the boys at the mountain further emphasizes the role that women play in keeping their communities afloat. Women embodies empathy that demonstrates their strength. The Women Leader is an epitome of courage found in the unconditional love and empathy of a woman's thought pattern.

Their selflessness and daring determination to free the boys indicates a woman's will and resilience for an unjust cause. Indictable for the failure of the king, the chief priest, and the elders. The women matched into the Forest Mountains not with weapons but with the strength of their love and an uncompromising determination; they brought back the boys and salvaged the community from collapse. Their determination is however mocked by a water seller who asked the women "Are you going to fight with your wrappers?" The women refused to be deterred by his contemptuous manner, as they been influential to rescue their sons. Their action gives credence that perhaps the non-inclusion of women in the position of legitimate decision-making could be the reason for the failure in leadership in most Nigerian societies.

The strength of women in social consciousness and nation-building building is better appreciated through the character of Old Woman, who become the beacon of wisdom and hope to the young ones. Through her character, the playwright buttresses the role of women in nurturing and molding the future. The playwright does not shy away from the obvious reality in the Nigeria society where women remain second to men in order to be adjudged good wives. The old woman, despite her wisdom, remains submissive and loyal to her husband's authority.

Likewise, the selection of the boy over the girl to become the next king despite both obtaining the same mode of education from the Old woman underscores the patriarchal values that place the woman beneath the man despite her qualifications, thus being some of the issues that feminism seeks to address. The playwright, however, layed a particular emphasis on female strength in solving the leadership question of the future if society, must move forward.

The Old woman serving as a moderator between two conflicting faiths, Pastor and Imam demonstrates women's leadership skills, this goes to say that, if given the opportunity (space) to maximize and exercise their potential without fear or hindrance, their positive impact will be felt not just within the home front but in the corridors of power.

### ***Synopsis of Jonathan Mbachaga's Widows Might***

Death has occurred of a man in his prime, leaving behind his middle-aged wife and three children. As applicable to the tradition of the community, the widow must drink the water used to bath the husband's corpse. In addition, she would have to strip naked before the elders of the family and establish her innocence to whatever may be responsible for her husband's death and also hand over all her husband's property to the family members.

However, things break down when the widow refuses to accept the laid-down traditional procedure. The elders in clear support of the tradition drag the widow before customary authorities. The young, educated widow sinks her foot to the ground in protest of not participating in the traditional rites. Her position further infuriates the elders who give her additional punishment for her disrespectful dismissal of the traditions. As other women hear about unfair treatment and have already been frustrated by oppressive traditions, they rally around her.

Championed by the Women Leader, the women took a full protest to challenge those aspects of the traditions that were harmful to the wellbeing of women in their community. While many men see this as fruitless efforts, women move the protest to the central market with the intention of stripping naked before the eyes of strangers in the market place. Upon hearing this development, elders send delegations to women requesting a negotiation.

A negotiation is reached, and the women are triumphant and given a place among elders in the community.

### **Analysis of *Widows' Might***

The play *Widows' Might* is set in the contemporary Igbo society. The playwright is expressive of the bitter and excruciating feelings and emotions of women, particularly widows, which arise from their subjugation to harmful cultural practices. The woman in the context of this play as a wife and widow, she is expected to behave and accept certain cultural practices without reservations.

Following the death of her husband, Ifeoma is expected to observe certain traditional rites against her will. This gives credence to the fact that women, are very often trapped by these barbaric, dehumanizing, and patriarchal-based customs and are forced to accept these laws and live by them. However, with the growing civilization in society and the mass literacy of women, such laws have been challenged.

Ogwoma emphasized the importance of education in challenging patriarchal norms and how it spurred Ifeoma's resistance. Therefore, education is key for women to break from the myth of gender superiority. Affirming this claim, Ogwoma says, "My sister's education is good." It is her education that helped her. "This explains why Ibekwe felt Ifeoma is using her education to threaten them says, "that you went to school does not change our tradition.' Whether you have degrees more than the instrument used by the White man to check temperature, we don't care. All we want is to know if you will fulfill our traditional rites like every other widow" (5).

Contravening Ibekwe's position, Maduka submits that Ifeoma's resentment is anchored on the fact that she is guilty of killing her husband, and thus she is afraid of the consequences. Ifeoma vehemently stands her grounds insisting that she did not kill her husband; that the medical report can attest to the fact, and there is no amount of pressure mounted her that would make her submit to their barbaric tradition. Her resistance brings hope for women as they rally round her to register their grievances over widow's maltreatment, women's subordination and discrimination. Soon enough, the women moved to a full-blown protest, threatening to pull on their naked before strangers at the Atankpo market. On hearing this development, the King sent words for negotiation and proposed ways for a harmonious coexistence between men and women in the community.

### **Comparative Analysis of *Town Hall Whispers* and *Widows' Might***

The plays *Town Hall Whispers* and *Widows' Might* both examine different dimensions of male dominance and the subjugation of women in society. While *Town Hall Whispers* focuses only on male leadership and misrule in Nigeria, *Widows' Might* took a cultural dimension to women's marginalization, exposing harmful cultural practices deployed by men to exploit women and relegate them to the rick burner. The characters of both plays know their fundamental human rights and, the deliberate attempt by men to subjugate them. Women in *Town Hall Whispers* are not considered for any leadership position despite the incompetence of the king and the gross failure of the elders despite adversity. No males had the courage to bring back the abducted youth from captivity and save the community, but the women. Yet women are considered weak and lack the skills to assume leadership



positions.

Deducing from the Socialist Feminist theory, the playwright adopts a collective approach by women to create the desired change in the community. Having been subjected to all forms of hardship due to male misrule, the women collectively depart their homes to form a rescue team to rescue their abducted sons caused by bad leadership.

The king's ineptitude coerces the women to abandon their stereotypical role of the house front and embark on a hunt into the forest mountain to rescue their sons, taken hostage of which the men appeared unbothered. In order to succeed, market women leaders factored in an economic war strategy to register their grievances:

**Market Women Leaders:** "We are the amazons of our generation, we shall not be humiliated or disgraced, our youths are our future and we must rescue them and bring them back home... as a first step, we shall embark on total economic warfare from tomorrow, we shall withdraw all foodstuffs from the market... If the economic blockade fails, we shall deploy the Home Front Strategy" (7).

Acting together, the women gallantly matched up the forest mountain unbothered about their safety and their husband's welfare. Traditionally, the welfare of a man remains her sole responsibility.

The play *Widows' Might*, on the other hand, depicts the torments of women in traditional Igbo society. The playwright expresses the bitter and excruciating feelings and emotions of women, particularly widows that arise from their subjugation and other harmful cultural practices. The 'woman' in the context of this play is conceived of as a wife, as a widow is expected to behave and accept certain cultural practices without reservations to prove their innocence as they are often accused of being the cause of their husbands' death. This is a strategy used to create fear and make them submit to the dehumanizing act, just as calculated means to denial them of their husband's properties. Consequently, most of these practices have negative health implications. The playwright portrayed the miserable fate of another widow who observed barbaric traditional rites just to prove her innocence at the event of her husband's death to emphasize the danger of these harmful practices. The character narrates her ordeal as follows:

**Chidinma:** I remember feeling sick after drinking the corpse's bath water to prove my innocence when my husband died. The Umuokpo said it was the spirit of my husband who was fighting me; every one deserted me except for a few widows who took me to the hospital where I was attended to. No! It must end, and we will stand by her (11).

The gross implications of most such practices cannot be overstated. In many cases, women have been reported to have died because of these practices. Some must live the rest of their lives in shame because of false accusations by unsubstantiated claims made by traditional oracles.

Therefore, both playwrights in view are concern about the fundamental rights of women and their struggle for emancipation. It is said that for a group's oppression to be abated, they must have unity of purpose, for a tree cannot make a forest. The collective struggling spirit as reflected in Mbachaga's *Widows Might* is further demonstrated by the actions of women forming a block-chain to resist their oppression, as conveyed by the Women Leader thus:

**Women Leader:** Widows and women of our land, it is time to stand up for and defend our dignity. Enough of widow maltreatment and abuse. Rise up, rise up and stand for freedom, freedom from the abuse of female dignity. Rise up and together let us stop the tradition and law that demeans and humiliates women. We must break the cocoon, a tradition that enslaves us now or forever be trampled underfoot... (23).

Both end with reconciliation following the elders' bowing to the demands of women for their freedom. The women are subsequently liberated from their private roles as wives, transforming into the public sphere by virtue of their integration into the village council as stakeholders involved in decision making and the subsequent abolishing of traditional laws that impinge on their fundamental human rights.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident from the discussion above that the traditional Nigerian norms embody tenets that limits female space. These norms impede on the rights of women and inhibit their full potential. As exemplified in the play analyses however; this has enormous negative effects on not only the woman folk but also nation building and societal development. This is because women constitute a good percentage of the entire population as, human resources, but from a disadvantaged position, they do not have the required opportunity to invest their potential into meaningful development. This happens not minding their level of education or social status, as illustrated in Ifeoma's situation in Mbachaga's *Widows' Might*. Likewise, the women in *Town Hall Whispers* also demonstrate acumen of awareness. They, abandoned their typical roles of wives to collectively act together not just as mothers but as people with will power who desire a change in the wake of adversity. By repudiation the unfair patriarchal barricade and bringing about change in their community. Both play therefore deploy a, collective approach by women to venture into an expanded scope beyond that created and allocated to them by their societies.

## Recommendations

In line with the textual analyses, the paper recommends that the position and length of the female space should be redefined in the Nigerian nation society. This would help address identity issues and boost the confidence of women as they would find themselves worthy of active participation as co-agents in the processes of development and nation-building.

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