

**FEMINISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICAN
DRAMA: A STUDY OF *THE REIGN OF WAZOBIA* BY TESS
ONWUEME**

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Introduction

Development may not have a particular definition but it centres around growth and better living for people in a particular community or environment. Sustainable Development (SD), therefore, involves keeping this development going over time. Wikipedia defines sustainable development as, “that development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This development can be economic, environmental or socio-political and since it affects every member of a society and all spheres of the society, then everyone has to be part of the move to achieve a sustainable development.

Most societies unfortunately feel that men are superior to women and therefore tend to ignore the latter in developmental plans. Patriarchy and male dominance are usually the norm in Africa but after United Nations (UN) declared 1975 as the International Women's Year, women gained more voices and sought for ways to change the second class status allotted to them. Three (3) themes were adopted in this decade - "Equality, Development and Peace. The slogan represents the then tripartite division of the world. “Equality was chosen, proposed by Western feminist groups, “Peace” was included, proposed by Socialist block while, “Development” was the choice of the developing countries of the third world of the south who perceived it as the major stimulus to the improvement of women's lives in the region”. (Princes Edith Ike, Mark

Odu. 6) ¹.

Women employed every means within their reach to speak out and dramatists are not left out in the quest for a Sustainable Development. Drama which is an initiation of real life event is symbolic with the society because, while it borrows its materials from the society, the society also learns from them (whether still in a play script or acted on stage). African Dramatists have borrowed extensively from their various societies and because these societies are rife with cultural practices, African dramatists have written in favour of, or against some of these cultures. For Irene Salami Agunloye, “African societies overflow with cultural practices which are reflected in our dramatic literature. A great deal of our contemporary literature are either addressing them or perpetrating their practices(19).² Many dramatists however have used their works to sensitize women on how to be viable agents of development in the African society. Some dramatists have chosen to write against the second class status women occupy in their plays and have instead given them positive and leadership roles which ordinarily men thought belonged to them only.

Feminism started in the West and some scholars feel that the movement for the promotion of women from insignificant to significant as opposed by men is different from that in other parts of the world especially Africa. The movement has assumed many names in Africa ranging from Womanism to Motherism and so on but the purpose still remains the same. Feminism therefore according to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary is a “belief in the principle that women should have the same rights and opportunity (legal, political, social, economic etc) as men, or the movement in support of this. Every discipline tends to have a feminist perspective and so also does the Theatre. Studies on and about women are modern trends and dramatists have used this opportunity to show women in different light. Feminist writers are necessarily not just women; there are also men who have written to condemn

the dehumanisation of women as lesser beings. Many African writers fall into the category of feminist writers and Tess Onwueme is one of such writers. All her works have a gender twist. She usually writes to highlight male patriarchy and how women respond in such situations. Some women in her plays have gone against the norms of the land to achieve their various aims and this is what *Wazobia* bids in the play, *The Reign of Wazobia* by Tess Onwueme in 1988.

Feminist Aesthetics and Drama as a Tool for Sustainable Development

Drama and Theatre are not solely for entertainment. They educate and conscientise the society on things happening around them. Drama mirrors the society and like Brain Crow says, Drama is “characterized by the use of impersonation carried on through a sequence of actions which convey a story to the audience” (5). If a play script is just read, the reader visualizes the actions in his mind's eye. A play must not be acted out on stage or on any other medium before the message is passed across. Inasmuch as a production will reach out to more people, a play can be read and enjoyed just like novels or poems are read, but it has to be visualized and played out in the mind to get meaning out of it. Plays are conscious piece of literature because the writers think them out before they write them down so as to effect changes in their environment.

Mabel Torise affirms that: All dramatises, both male and female, create to reveal their own reality, textual or contextual, to the audience or receive of their texts. This reality refers in so far as it is aligned and relevant to the well being of those at the receiving end of the drama, and gained forms of development, rapid or gradual. These forms of development become better appreciated when they are sustained. (263)³. According to Kathleen Berry, “Aesthetics are cultural representations

and forms that define love, beauty, truth, justice and dignity. The arts have traditionally served as a major means of aesthetic expression” (18)⁴.

Feminist Aesthetics thereby inquire gender influences on art and society. This inquiry throws light on how culture and other media affect the participation of women in their environment. Africa cannot talk about development without mentioning the role of women in it. More women getting involved in play writing is a welcome development. It goes to show that there is a change in the usual norm of more men being in the play writing business. Feminist Theatre is a theatre about women; it showcases their experiences in their societies. It makes women the subject matters and women appreciate this type of theatre. According to Ngozi Udengwu, “the purpose of this theatre is not to make profit nor even to exhibit mastery of the art of theatre, but to raise women's consciousness about themselves, about their rights in the society as well as to encourage them reclaim their voices which have been silenced for ages” (34)⁵. Tess Onwueme has revealed through her works that feminist theatre not only projects women but also shows how they can contribute in their societies. Mabel Tobrise echoes this in her works that through Tess Onwueme's creativity which is woman-pivot in theme, content and style, we see an inchoate feminist theatre, her plays have cognate feminist strategies which have helped and can still help to engender women's role in the development of Nigeria along the lines of culture enlightenment, education, health, patriotism and income generation” (267)⁶.

Feminist theatre however is persuasive and at times confrontational. Leavitt describes feminist. Theatre as “pro-women, associated with the woman's movement and is community-involved” (9)⁷. Feminist theatre is all inclusive because there is no form of struggle for superiority. It is only used that women are not just sexual beings. This form of theatre sheds light in the

contributions of women in the development of their society.

This is why Mabel Tობrise is of the opinion that, “A properly managed feminist theatre can facilitate a better social order, engender political stability and an untroubled economy” (269)

Feminist Issues in Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia*

The *Reign of Wazobia*- is a play written by Tess Onwueme in 1988. It centres on *Wazobia*, a woman who was chosen as the regent of *Ilaa* following the death of the King. After three years (at the end of her tenure), she refuses to give up the throne. The wives she inherited from the late king are not all in support of her, neither is the *Omu* (the Queen of all Mothers). *Wazobia's* hold on to power is illegal but she refuses to leave because she has development in mind. She is an advocate for peace, progress and unity in the land of *Ilaa* and she strongly believes that all she needs to bring about this development not minding the fact that she is a woman. This simply shows that change and development are not brought about by men alone but by those who will and work towards it.

At the inception of *Wazobia's* ruler ship, she meets oppositions, not just from the male folk but female folk too. Her refusal to abdicate the throne is unheard of and the people of *Ilaa* decide to stick to the tradition of male dominance rather than accept a woman as their king. *Omu* makes this point clear in her words that . . . ,

OMU: Tradition! Tradition as we met it. Tradition passed down to us from the time when the world's eyes were still closed. Tradition handed down from generation to generation. Tradition..... Tradition..... *Wazobia*.... (22).

Wazobia is however not perturbed by the *Omu's* outburst. Even when she summons a meeting of all the people in the land to the palace-square to address

a case of wife battery, the chiefs are of the opinion that women and youth be sent away.

Idehen: I support what my fellow chief Iyase has to say. Serious matters of state concern are too heavy for the brittle heads of women and children (24)

Development is a positive agendum but if people dwell on which of the gender is better than the other, then development will never be visible. For development to be sustained, continuity is required and it does not matter who is in power as long as there is better life for the people in their environments. *Wazobia* tries severally to ask men to give women a chance since they had not achieved much since they (the men) started ruling but it sounded strange because they were stuck on tradition. They refused to grow with the times and tradition is one thing that holds people down. As long as it is tradition, people will accept it without listening to the voice of reason. Despite the antagonism by both the men and women of *Ilaa* Kingdom, *Wazobia* remains fearless and this is intentional because Tess Onwueme wants to drive a point home that, women are also human beings who can bring positive changes in their communities. *Wazobia* explores every avenue known to her to make sure that her people unite to bring about the desired change. She carries women along because she believes that the efforts of men and women are needed to bring about change. Her theory for unity and change is this:

Wazobia: Now hear our manifesto. Henceforth the symbol of our kingdom shall be the palm-tree which from top to bottom has all and produces all; from leaves, to shade, to broom. From fruit, to wine, to oil, to kernel ... That is the palm. Each part has its own value and yet interdependent on all other parts ... That is the palm. Each part has its own value and yet interdependent on all other parts ... Henceforth, women will have equal representation in rulership (33).

Wazobia's manifesto is a summary of how she wants the land of *Ilaa* and she

eventually achieves that. She wonders why women will be barred from exploring their God given potentials all in the name of tradition.

Wazobia: Women have ears. Why must they be prevented from hearing with their ears? Women have heads, why must they be stuffed with cotton wool, only useful for cleaning up their men? Women have hands, why must they not be allowed to use them fully to construct? (36).

Wazobia is persuasive and even confrontational in her approach to make the people of *Ilaa* accept her. She does not get everyone to her side but her supporters are solidly behind her and help her fight obnoxious traditions and bring change.

Conclusions and Way Forward

Doofan and Alachi cite Okpeh who states that, “the definition of feminity has become synonymous with domesticity, while mobility, power, superiority and opportunities (are) in the super domestic sphere” (195).⁸ Tess Onwueme's message in *The Reign of Wazobia* is simply that women have to fight for their rights. They should not sit and watch men do it all. They can do it and may even do it better than men, if they put in their best. Mabel Tobrise cites Elizabeth Natalie who states that feminist theatre is “persuasive” and is “designed to influence the beliefs and convictions of both the members of the audience and members of the theatre. She went further to say that, “feminists argue against theory oppression, seeking a change in their identity ... and their subordinate position in society” (267). Any society that excludes women in its developmental plans will not have a complete development not to talk of one which will be sustained. *Wazobia*'s consistent struggle and good intention brought changes. Tess Onwueme has used drama as a medium of

communication to reach out to people in her play, *The Reign of Wazobia* to tell them that women are also human beings who can bring about the desired change that will last and will benefit everyone in the particular society.

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