

Shifting Ideological Conceptions of Gender and the Challenge of Characterisation in Nigerian Drama

Nijerya Dramasında Cinsiyete İlişkin Değişen İdeolojik Kavramlar ve Karakter

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ABSTRACT

Drama has, over the years, portrayed issues of gender inequality and agitations, from Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, J. P. Clark's *The Wives Revolt*, Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*, Fred Agbeyegebe's *The King Must Dance Naked*, Tracie Uto's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, Irene Salami-Aguloye's *Sweet Revenge, More Than Dancing* to Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* by the Ghanaian writer. The list of plays x-raying gender and feminist issues is endless. Drama has thus portrayed gender issues in its complexities, limiting itself majorly to the male-female binary in gender discusses. Using the psychoanalytical theory, Feminism, Genderism and Postgenderism as critical paradigms, the paper interrogates contemporary Nigerian drama portrayal of discriminatory gender practices arising from the social-cultural construct of the dichotomy between the genders. It uses Ben Binebai's monodrama, *Karena's Cross*, as the primary text in a paradigmatic study of gender, male-female relationships, perceptions, presentations and portrayals of social roles in drama. The study identifies that over the years, drama has portrayed the female gender in stereotypical ways and presented socially constructed images of male-female relationship that reinforces the victim status of the female gender. The paper also identifies that Nigerian society is no more as traditional as it used to be. There is presently a transition from stereotypical gender understanding to an acceptance of western concepts of gender and gender roles. The paper concludes that Nigeria, and Africa, is presently experiencing a reversal of thought and perception of gender roles. The paper identifies that there is a nostalgic reliance on a past and fading culture in contemporary Nigerian drama presentation of gender issues, which reinforces archetypally held notions of gender.

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Introduction

All forms of drama communicate images of the sexes, many of which reinforce or perpetuate stereotypical, unrealistic and sometimes limiting perceptions of gender. Feminist drama has thus tended to portray women as severely disadvantaged in the following areas: (1) As underrepresented in drama. This presents a false view that men determine the cultural standards by which women have to live, and so men deliberately make women invisible and unimportant as

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an appendage of patriarchal desires and wills. (2) Gender is portrayed in stereotypical ways that presents the sexes at war with each other. The titles of this play either point to the fact that the woman is an endangered species or is in a form of bondage to which she must be liberated. (3) The relationship between the genders is presented in such a way that reinforces socially held notions. Violence against women is portrayed as a mode of advancing the plot and conflict of the dramas. Women are depicted as the victims and the men as perpetrators of oppression, suppression, silencing and brutalization of women. From the African ideological conception of gender, the idea of the woman as a victim seems to be taken with some reservation. As noted by Gboyega et al. in the preface to the edited book, *A Graceful Woman of Great Discerning: A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Mabel Ekwierhoma*

It is time to rid our usual selves of the skewed knowledge that women are hereditary victims of a perpetual patriarchal world. There is no evidence that supports it. From the primordial setting, women had been earning for themselves, by dint of tangible and intangible attainments, the prestige equal to that of men. Their accomplishments soared above human expectations such that some of them, at death, became subjects of deification and subsequent worship. Until the nineteenth century, the advent of the colonizer, this experience of women having equal opportunities as men to excel in their chosen trade was unhindered. (2020, p. i)

By dint of sharing a similar colonial history, the Nigerian experience (British West Africa) shares a similar colonial experience with India. India boasts of women in its history who have risen above philosophical and ideological appendages to chart new ways for the people and determine the course of history. Women like Anandibai Gopalrao Joshi, the first Indian female physician in 1887, Ahilhabai Holker, the philosopher queen of Malwa/Indore, and Indira Gandhi, among several pre-colonial and post-colonial Indian inspiring women who were not defined by the limits of social circumstances and the cultures of their times. Nigeria (Africa) equally shares names of great women achievers. Wangari Maathai, Miriam Makeba (Mama Africa), Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Queen Amina of Zaria, Emotan of Benin, Moremi of Ife, The Women soldiers of Dahomey, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala amongst several others past and present that enrich Africa and Nigeria's cultural history.

For centuries, the Western world has attempted to foist on the global south ideological conceptions of gender inequality and its attendant psychological inhibitions. This is not to say that women in India and Africa do not undergo cultural practices that tend to be unfair to them, rather, the idea of the woman as a perpetual victim and radical separatist philosophies of the West are alien to many cultures in the global south. In what follows, the study examines the portrayal of discriminatory gender practices in contemporary Nigerian drama. It uses Ben Binebai's monodrama, *Karena's Cross*, as the primary text in a paradigmatic study of gender, male-female relationships, perceptions, presentations and portrayals of social roles in drama.

Genderism and Postgenderism

Genderism as a philosophical construct presupposes the existence of only two genders-the male and female. It endorses the idea that gender roles are naturally assigned at birth. It thus excludes all other contemporary inclusions into the gender discussion, such as transgender and all forms of medical assisted and assigned gender roles. Genderism equally looks at the discrimination and prejudices held against all genders. Cisgenders are equally not left out in genderism discuses.

In one of my class lectures on characterization in drama, drained by the continuous reference to the gender binary, one of my students queried, "can't we just be human beings? Must there be reference to gender in defining character? Can't individual human character traits be discussed without reference to gender." Unknowingly, the student has hit at the very issues of concern to

postgenderism. Postgenderism as a theoretical cum critical construct is concerned with issues of physical character traits of the sexes. It is aimed at moving gender studies and discusses beyond the male-female binary towards a neuter understanding. It seeks to eliminate the man-woman dichotomy and consider characters as humans. The individual human character is thus the focus of analysis of human action. In post-gender discusses man is neither man nor woman. It considers humanity in neuter terms.

The major argument in post-gender discussion is that gender is a social construct. An arbitrary assignment and classification of humanity into two categories that limit human potential. It draws an argument from psychoanalysis. Embedded in psychoanalysis is the psychology of consciousness and the doctrine of unconscious motivation, psychosexual development and transference resistance as the basis for therapy in neurosis. It is, therefore, an argument for the erasure of gender. Postgenderism considers gender as an "accidental binary assignment" (Geary, 2006; Ridley, 2003). In *Postgenderism: Beyond the Gender Binary*, George Dvorsky and James Hughes argue that

The gender binary has shaped the human condition, causing us to see the world through basic binary categories from our metaphysics to our linguistics. The biological bases of gendered cognition, gender identity and sexual preference impose limits on our capacity for communication and intersubjective understanding and empathy. Biological gender dimorphism is the most basic power dynamic in society, allowing men to coerce women with their stronger bodies and dominance-driven behaviour.

Today, however, our Enlightenment values and emergent human potentials have come into conflict with the rigid gender binary. We have spent the last two hundred years in the West slowly dismantling the heritage of patriarchal power, culture and thought. Juridical equality, weapons and the police have reduced the determinative power of male physical coercion. Post-industrial production, contraception and abortion have eliminated most of the rationale for gendered social roles in work and the family, reducing the burden of patriarchal oppression on women. (2008, p. 2)

Dvorsky and Hughes (2023) state further that "Postgenderism confronts the limits of a social constructionist account of gender and sexuality and proposes that the transcending of gender by social and political means is now being complemented and completed by technological means" (p. 2). Postgenderism is supported by the existence of indeterminate or intersexed individuals like hermaphrodites, or other conditions of culturally and bio-medically disputed sex. Genitals are not considered to be determinants of human sex. Thus, gendering such individuals with such conditions may lead to psychological and sexual conflicts within such individuals that may limit their human capacity for self-exploration and development.

Ideological Conceptions of Gender

There is a growing gap in the social reality of how women see themselves, how men see themselves, how women see men and how men see women. This has led to the difficult to define psychological and social spaces of what either of the sexes thinks the other want. The divide within the circle of feminist agitations further buttresses this assumption and further indicates the complexity of gender discussions. The inability to bridge gaps of understanding and perceptions between the sexes has led to the institution of social cultures, relationship conflicts, social constructs, perceptions of the male-female body and several conflicts in family and workplace relationships.

The concept of gender itself is undergoing transition. The fluidity with which the term gender is used and the hardline that is most often drawn by the conservative right and liberal left on gender classification indicates ideological polarity. The concept of gender is currently undergoing changes

in society with the presence of LGBTQ2+ in the social space who are continuously self-asserting their presence in hitherto conservative space. It is obvious that future generations of humanity will have a different conception of the term gender than that held by the past and present generations. The transition between these two polarities has fuelled and is fuelling social, political, economic and economic conflicts. There are indications that these conflicts will continue to expand with the call for inclusiveness in framing gender identity and sexual preferences.

Several scholars have postulated on aggressive, vibrant, irritable, blindness, disputes, and fallacies that have characterized women's studies and, by extension, gender and the feminist movement (Scott 1997, 1998; Boxer, 2003; Skeggs, 1995). Although the idea of male strength and superiority has been perpetuated over the years in gender and feminist discussions and reinforced by media, literature and popular culture, scholars have equally interrogated the concept. In her *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that the concept of female gender as other is a social construct borne out of social contrasting of male physical strength against female physical incapability. She argues that society has thus strengthened male dominance through certain structures that are disadvantageous to women. While acknowledging that there are biological differences between male and female gender, she insists that biological differences are not enough reason for the relegation of the female to the position of the other sex.

Chinweizu (1990) challenges the basic conception of feminism of women as weak, socially, and culturally disadvantaged. Chinweizu undertook a psychoanalytical and eschatological dissection of the female power. According to him, "Men may rule the world, but women rule the men who rule the world". Thus, contrary to appearances, woman is boss, the overall boss of the world" (p. 12). Chinweizu describes man as being ruled by woman throughout his life. He divided the life cycle of a man as controlled by centers of female power into "motherpower, bridepower, and wifepower" (p. 14). Thus, throughout life, the man is ruled by woman. There are five conditions that enable women to control men which Chinweizu further refers to as the "five pillars of female power." The five pillars according to him are: "Women's control of the womb; women's control of the kitchen, women's control of the cradle; psychological immaturity of the man relative to the woman; and man's tendency to be deranged by his excited penis" (1990, pp. 14-15).

There are several drama texts that illustrate Chinweizu's theory. Aristophanes *Lysistrata* tells the story of women using sex (bridepower) as a weapon to force men to end the Peloponnesian war. In the story of the Trojan War, we learn of how the fight to possess a woman led to the destruction of Troy, a thriving city. J. P. Clark tells a similar story in *Wives Revolt* in which the women of Eruemukohwarien, a Niger Delta community whose elders, made up of only men, after receiving money paid as compensation for oil spillage decided on a sharing formula that was unfair to the women. Angered by the greed displayed by the men, the women protested by abandoning their domestic duties by going to a neighbouring community of Eyara to stay – "wifepower." Eyara is a community that is filled with diseases. The men are forced after a few days to plead with the women to return home because they could not handle domestic and sexual starvation. Thus, according to Chinweizu, it is the womb with the help of the "motherpower" that creates the gender ideal.

Feminist propaganda and conventional knowledge notwithstanding, it seems prima facie odd to claim that women are powerless in society and, in particular, over men. What one wants, then women are far from powerless. Women do get, and always did get, what they want - be it riches, thrones, the head of John the Baptist, or routine exemption from hardships and risks which their male folk are obliged to endure. That women operate by methods which often differ from those available to men does not in any way mean that women are bereft of power. (Chinweizu, 1990, p. 16)

The conception of some feminist scholars that the woman is the man's "domestic servant, resident sexpot, childbearer, childrearer etc" (Chinweizu 1990, p. 46) is argued against by Chinweizu, who sees the reality of the relationship as the woman making the man her "nest slave" by exploiting male macho power to protect and provide for her and her offspring. The decision to enter into the contract of a relationship and the articles of the contract are entirely dependent on the woman's acceptance. Even in cases of arranged marriages, the man's ability to fulfill the obligations is scrutinized and considered by her representatives before the contract is contacted. The man must prove his loyalty and abilities, as well as economic, protective, and sexual competence, before she adopts him in the absence of better choices. No woman adopts a man who is inferior to what she is capable of capturing.

Theoretical Explication

Two theories were used in this study first, is the Psychoanalysis and second is Feminism. Psychoanalysis as a theoretical construct is a method of examining a text as a manifestation of the author's own state of neurosis. Individual characters in a text are equally examined as part of the author's neurosis conceived as in a dream state, which is seen as a fulfilment of the author's innate dreams and desires. Freud notes of the theory that

The dream-thoughts which we first come across as we proceed with our analysis often strike us by the unusual form in which they are expressed; they are not clothed in the prosaic language usually employed by our thoughts but are, on the contrary, represented symbolically by means of similes and metaphors, in images resembling those of poetic speech (p. 26).

Psycho analysis also seeks to unearth symptoms of disunity within a literary work. It seeks signs and symbols of psychological conflict, unresolved conflicts and emotions and the likes in a literary work. It is concerned with what the author is unearthing, what the author has repressed in his work with his conscious literary mind. It is equally applied to character analysis in unearthing psycho-character motivation. Feminism, on the other hand, is a very difficult to define concept. It has become so malleable and embracing several ideological configurations that today, if you are not a feminist, your ideological learning becomes difficult to define, just like the terms feminism and gender. Feminism is rooted in the ideological conception that women are powerless against macho power. There is a need to liberate women from the stranglehold of patriarchy and patriarchal institutions that hold women hostage and deny them economic, political and cultural power. Feminists see most women as subalterns.

The Female Character in Binebai's *Karena's Cross*

Portrayal of the female character in drama has been consistent with social perception of what the society expects of her. Archetypally, the female has been portrayed as weak to reinforce socially conceived ideals. Although there are few iconoclastic portrayals of women in heroic and rebellious roles, the number of such roles are few compared to those characterizing her as dormant and docile. As noted by Eni (2018), "In Africa, there are patterns of ascribed gender-based social norms as dictated by behaviour. Accepted female behavioural patterns are not only judged by laws but by the idealized conception of what a woman should be and do" (p. 580). Thus, Julia (1997) marked female characterization in drama by the following stereotypical portrayal of gender. Drama has continued to represent men and women in traditional ways that limit the perception and possibilities of humanity. Rather than stress the humanity in the individual, ascribed gender roles in drama have been portrayed as determinants of social, economic, political, and cultural growth: "Typically, men are portrayed as active, adventurous, powerful, sexually aggressive, and largely uninvolved in human relationships. Just as consistent with cultural views of gender are the depictions of women as sex objects" (p. 2). The relationship between men and women is also

portrayed as a stereotype; low or non-representation of non-aligned genders; women dependent on men syndrome; men's authority and women's incompetence; men as breadwinners and women as caregivers (pp. 3-7); pathologizing the human body in drama; beauty appropriated with slimness and youth, ugliness with fatness and old age. Thus, language like "old hag," "fat fool," "pretty young girl" are often used to pathologize the human body.

Karena's Cross is a monodrama written by Ben Binabai and published by Kraft books in 2022. The play chronicles the journey of the young Karena, who was betrothed to be married off by her father to a man old enough to be her father. Her attempt to run away from a forced marriage saw her struggling through several culturally and socially imposed conditions until she finally meets Mr. Daniels, who rescues her from being flown abroad as a sex slave. Mr. Daniels marries her and sends her to school. She returns to her community later with her husband, a medical doctor, to commission a hospital. Through her example, several perceptions and negative cultures are altered. In telling her story, she states:

I now work in a famous law chamber
And have given birth to two lovely
Children, a boy and a girl-
Daniel and Karena Jnr.
My husband came into my life
Like a virtuous prince and made
Me feel complete. I met a man,
Whose love for me is deep.

Karena paints the picture of the ideal man as one who is family centred. One who protects, cares, loves, and cherishes the woman. The ultimate success or achievement of a woman is, therefore, her ability to find the ideal man. The ultimate judge of the quality of a man rests solely on his ability to love, care, and protect the woman and her seeds. Any man who lacks these qualities that are not beneficial to the woman is a villain. Karena's travails are painted by the playwright as male induced. All her troubles are due to the fact that she is born a woman in a male dominated world. She has no hubris (the perfect feminist characterization). If there are flaws in her personality, it is because the men in her world had made her what she is. She has no choice in the negotiation of the spaces in which she finds herself. Her voice is entirely stifled by the men (interestingly, and women) in her world. She is a fragile, perfect female creation in a society dominated by demonic males except Daniel. The moment she finds the ideal male, all her troubles vanish, and she attains glorious heights. Psychoanalytically, Karena's quest through her developmental stages is to find the ideal man. Thus, in her id is deeply planted the idea that marriage to the ideal man, the man she loves, is the only route to a fulfilling life. She navigates her world as a victim until she conquers a nest slave. In essence, all characters in the narrative behave traditionally in the gender assigned roles.

Although, Mr. Daniel liberates Karena from her continuous state of helplessness and propels her to a position of strength, this is, at the same time, perpetuating traditional and archetypal conceptions of marriage and patriarchy. While purporting to advance the feminist cause, it is actually perpetuating patriarchal thinking. The idea that the girl child cannot survive in the present communal and social configuration without recourse to marriage to a providing man is in itself as inhibiting to the female psyche as the conditions that Karena had to go through before she met Mr. Daniel. Here, patriarchy is portrayed as the all-powerful force in society that determines the fate of the woman. When patriarchy desires, it bestows success on the woman through marriage to a providing male.

In the present global redefinition and the changing concept of gender roles in the society, this

thinking will find it hard to get a foothold. Today's generation of youths are more independent minded than communal. With the wide acceptance and involvement of the younger generation in LGBTQ+, there are indications that there is a growing generational gap in the conception and perception of gender and gender roles. It is therefore hard for the present generation to accept the traditional characterization as put forward in *Karena's Cross*. There is presently a shift in traditional thinking of gender.

Binebai's summation of gender roles in society is tilted towards female protection and male vilification. The brutalization of Karena by women, a typical pointer to the crises within the feminist fold, did not earn the angst of the victim. She narrated the event simply as orchestrated by the men. Karena speaks of her circumcision ordeal thus:

The elderly woman took me to a bathroom for the circumcision. A woman with big buttocks carrying a weight I can't struggle to lift and throw away, sat on my chest. Two women held my two arms backwards and pressed them down while others held my two legs down with resolute force. The woman who did the circumcision sat on my abdomen. Six held me down to do the circumcision. I shouted madly, I bled and fainted several times. On the day I was discharged from the clinic, I was told to prepare for the post-circumcision ceremony and be married to my father's friend. (Ben, 2022, pp. 29-31)

Karena's limitations, therefore viewed from Postgenderism and Psychoanalysis theories, are self-imposed since gender and sexuality are social constructs. It is her inability to think beyond her sex that limits her potential and is not hindered by male dominance. Gendered spaces are negotiated rather than imposed. However, feminists tend to see the gendered spaces as imposed rather than negotiated. The idea that the woman was not part of the creation of the spaces is absurd. The argument that she had no choice in the process of the creation of the spaces is negated by the very narrative, which gives vent to her idea of victimhood. Viewed, therefore, from Chinweizu's analysis of female power, her perceived weakness is in itself a strategy of conquest.

Conclusion

The present state of gender studies has given rise to the re-thinking of political and social structures. From science to technology, humanities and the social sciences, new words and concepts are emerging that are reshaping our traditional conception of gender, particularly among Nigerian drama. Concepts like Technoscience, gendered ecology, provident economy, gendered spaces, etc., are becoming common lexis in Nigerian Drama. Making a change and transitioning to a new mode of thinking about gender is causing conflicts of acceptance and rejection. The dramatic characterization of gender has not helped society in making the needed transition.

Furthermore, gender reordering has further increased social divisions by fuelling female hegemony. It has almost become a taboo in academic circles to talk about female domination. Oppressively present today is feminists ideological push into spaces hitherto occupied by the male dramatist. These pushes and spatial contentions have further widened the gender divide. The rise of medically assisted gendering has gone further to complicate the male female dichotomy. Transgender, homosexuals, lesbians, she-males, transvestites, cross-dressers, neuters, gender dualism, and other forms of ideological re-orderings of gender realities have further made it difficult to dramatic characterization, social reality and acceptance. While altered gender ideologies are fairly widely accepted in the Western world, in the third world, gender thinking is still largely traditional and highly religiously modulated. Biological division of the sexes is still majorly the main understanding. Thus, favouring Ecofeminism, Biological Essentialism, Motherism and its twin principles of nature and nurture as gender/feminist ideological preferences.

Finally, while intersexed characterization is beginning to appear in film and popular culture, their characterization in drama, especially Nigerian drama, is still rare. In Africa and other third-world countries, the acceptance of neutered gender or intersexed individuals is still regarded highly as a taboo and a natural abnormality or a social dysfunction and is largely regarded as psychiatric cases which should be corrected. There are indications that Nigeria, Africa and the Third World may not be able to hold on to the traditional conception of gender any longer as there is presently a transition in thinking gender and gender variants are readily becoming more readily accepted.

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