

Viewed Snapshots of Sundry Female Paradigms in Drama and Theatre

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CONTEMPORARY Africa has found many uses for theatre and the different efforts within and outside the academy shows that practitioners keep reinventing the arts of theatre. In Africa, attempts are made to build communal strengths using performance from a gender focal point. Many gender-based troupes existed where efforts geared towards communal balance rested on both the male and female performers. Where women were concerned, many performances and theatrical endeavours by female singers, dancers, griots, and masquerades (to a limited extent), used theatre to deconstruct patriarchy, especially the social, economic and political challenges people, especially women, faced in communities. To view any snapshot of the female ethos in Nigerian drama and theatre, there is the need to observe the current paradigm thrust in intervention strategies by performers, writers and critics with development as the focus. Nevertheless, the need exists for a deliberate attempt to note where the paradigm shifted from, before the current trends are foregrounded. This also necessitates the future projection of the women-centred culture.

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Performance is power and when gender constructs are performed, communities undergo mutation and empowerment. Specifically, women's performance or reflections of the issues that concern their lives and aspirations have become prototypes to facilitate empowerment strategies, policy implementation and interpretation in textual and contextual terms. Here, women's essence with regard to their roles and rights become models of the peoples' rights on which community strengths are built. One means of actualizing this is through political engagement on stage, text and context; as well as economic participation and governance.

This ethos based on the female outlook is one channel of co-opting other members of the community into the process of development and other routes of daily communal living, especially in rural or even urban communities. The academy in Nigeria is located within these spaces and the impact of the physical environment on textual outputs in our universities has been fertile. Zulu Sofola's *Song of a Maiden* is a case in point. Here the symbioses between town and gown reflect tradition and modernity and the different identities that construct them.

Snapshots of the Female Ethos attempts to look at the ethnographical sources of these performative intervention efforts from different angles, whether they are communally exogamous or endogamous. There are attempts by different essayists to decipher whether there is a female ethos in Nigerian drama and theatre performance and what forms it takes. The different authors concern themselves with the kinds of women's participation in Nigerian theatre and the connections between the female ethos and development paradigms. Many discover the answer is in the affirmative, and attempt to state the paradigms through different shots of the

female culture. Whether long, medium, or short, from wide or narrow angles, there are snapshots using different lenses.

However some negative answers illustrate the need to revise the sole emphasis on, or concern with female-only approaches. Why is this so? I wager that any plan to take socio-historical snapshots at women could produce different angles of interpretation. Another aspect of the female ethos is seen in relation to the male ethos, for the female cannot be exclusive of the male ethos. One culture cannot exist without the other. When the foregrounding of female issues yields dividends for the home and public sphere, it may not augur well for society if one gender suffers exclusion from the common trend of things.

This book, therefore, clearly focuses on the portraiture of women, some by men, women and jointly by both women and men. The ensuing argument may be that it is reality standing on one leg, not balanced and requires a counterpart male ethos also dramatized in plays. A lot of arguments have ensued on the need for a female standpoint in play analysis (Evwierhoma 18). Dina Amin asserts that the "lack of equality between the sexes in terms of dramatic writing and stage-voice on the one hand, and fictional representation on the other, is indeed an issue that needs to be researched further ... (15). The contributors help to prove the claim by Douglas Kellner that "All texts are subject to multiple readings depending on the perspectives... of the reader" (15).

Should we therefore hold the essayists responsible for their roles as critics of the texts they encountered first-hand or through the works of fellow critics? Is it out of place to make women the readers of texts by women alone, or to make them the agents of reviewing even plays by male

dramatists? Do we have discrepancies between the writing female and the reading female and vice versa? Is it possible for gender implications to arise from this kind of reading, if at all we are able to decipher what they are, and the differentials they generate? It is my belief that this collection of essays will assist those who criticise women to do so objectively. The outcome of the above query is that it does matter who generates the snapshots, but more so, in this outing, it is the female ethos that matters more, generated either by male or female critics. Whether the snapshots are framed, unframed, or are frame-resistant, it is the different approaches to produce the snapshots that prevail in this attempt to encase the female ethos.

It is a fact that drama and theatre in Nigeria has changed since independence in 1960. The impact of new technologies after the 20th century and the rapid changes that technologies are undergoing presently have influenced Nigerian communities and their theatrical performances. This means that attempts to view the culture and traditions in their effects on women, made evident in plays and performances on stage, in films, and other media can never be monolithic.

In *Snapshots of the Female Ethos*, there are thirteen essays and one interview following this introduction. Most of the contributors are women and from their diverse perspectives, gender concepts are reassessed with the essays bearing on their own the need to re-address male headship, patriarchy and the assorted debilitating viewpoints that push the woman to the periphery of existence. The first essay focuses on gender complementarity, in Sunnie Ododo's libretti *To Return from the Void* and *Vanishing Vapour* and delivers the much expected verdict about complementarity among the two dominant genders. The three contributors Yacim, Okposio and Ogbeche

utilize Catherine Acholonu's concept of powerful and prevailing female ancestry to articulate their views which centre on complementarity among the sexes. They dwell on female centredness provided by Acholonu's Motherism, a viable alternative to Feminism.

The next contribution by Methuselah Jeremiah argues the relevance of the term 'harmful' used to qualify some cultural practices against women. He uses *Edewede* and *On His Demise* to assess leviration, woman-woman marriage, and female genital cutting, among other practices, in order to value them in context.

Following Jeremiah's entry is the essay on feminism and womanism as counteractive powers, two plays by female dramatists – Osita Ezenwanebe and Stella Oyedepo – are the crux of analysis the essay in chapter four. The underlying concept here is patriarchy which signals biases against women, thereby leading to their marginalization. The employment of psychoanalysis to critique their plays helps to locate the texts within mental and social spaces.

From literary texts, the attention shifts to Nigerian movies in the contribution by May Okocha and Tosan Akinwale. The differential between female and male talk and the different worth society ascribes to each reflects in *Aye Olomo Kan* and *Widow*, two filmic outputs by Funke Akindele and Agatha Amata respectively. Both detail a mother's role in contemporary Nigeria. Motherhood is revealed as a burden that is only made light when children turn out well as adults.

The approach of women as viewers of women is considered as a metaphor to assess the plays of Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme in the next chapter. Here, feminism, which we encountered in the last but one essay, is seen as a tool to

