

**NEW VOICES WITHIN THE DRAMATIC BORDERS: AN  
INTERROGATION OF THE THEMATIC TRENDS OF SELECTED PLAYS  
OF TRACIE UTOH-EZEAJUGH**

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**Abstract**

The world of modern dramatic consciousness and practice, has produced tremendous growth and development especially in the area of writing. Such that dramatic enactments have lent their spaces to expressions of human existence, experience; both consciousness and sub-consciousness. Hence, dramatic literature remains the critical medium of artistic expression where all aspects of human experiences are mirrored. Instructively, the playwrights, who emerged in the recent past of Nigerian dramatic writing, are seen as changing the direction being taken in the art of telling the story dramatically. They have, as such, constituted strong and viable voices which are articulating the diverse components and dimension of the society. These constitute the group of playwrights referred to as *New Voices* and they are *bringing the much needed freshness* through the re-sounding and articulation of their voices across dramatic realities. One of these emergent playwrights portrayed as 'new voices' is Tracie Utoh – Ezeajugh. It is against this backdrop that this paper takes a holistic and critical approach to initiate a thematic interrogation of her *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!* and *Nneora: An African Doll's House*. The methodology harnessed for the study recognizes the content analysis approach for analyzing the primary texts qualitatively. It has employed the Reader- Response Theory or Aesthetics of Reception as the theoretical framework, which implies that “a new individual 'text' evolves with every individual reading process”. The paper discovers that *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!* serves a dramatic avenue for the portrayal of humanism through interrogation of the essence of women being in position of authority or power as well as unification of men and women in the fight against global decadence. While *Nneora: An African Doll's House* is used as a social crusading platform in tune with the nuances and cadences of the contemporary Nigerian society. In conclusion, the study tried to underscore the place of Tracie Utoh – Ezeajugh, categorized as a 'new voice', within the context of the navigation of her dramatic corpus filled with divergent thematic trends.

**Keywords:** New Voices, Drama, Themes, Trends, Playwrights, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again, Nneora: An African Doll's House

**Introduction**

Drama has over the years remained a potent tool for achieving different things in different societies of the world especially in the areas of religion, education, economy, politics and culture. Most importantly, it has been constituted as an art form to harness the effective orientation of the masses.

This interest is placed in the dissemination of information from the playwright to the audience or the percipient as the case may be with the sole purpose of creating meaning and generating actions or re-actions.

Taking a glimpse at the growth and development of drama in Nigeria, it could be seen as having flourished through the works of the elite playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, J. P. Clark, Zulu Sofola, Ama Ata Aidoo, Tess Onwueme, Femi Osofisan and Emeka Nwabueze who have thrived in reflecting the enormous realities while traversing the divergent landscapes across the Nigerian milieu. Nigerian playwrights, in general, have been undertaking artistic diagnosis of and curative journey into the society socio-political and economic as well as cultural existence. They have continued to engage matters arising from social concerns in their plays. The writers of the dramatic thought's immediate socio-political context are regarded as the material course of the texts since the raw material for their literary productivity comes from their society. They take further their creative media to articulate their own perception on matters they perceive as relevant and contributory to national growth and development. In effect, they serve as invaluable change agents. The sociological dimension, which describes the relevance of writers in Nigeria, is located in their grasp and understanding of the interplay of social forces within their socio-political reality as Achebe argues that if the African writers do not present the events of their society in their works, their works are irrelevant. Expectedly, Nigerian writers rose to the task of not just capturing the socio-political disconnection that had engulfed the polity, but also condemned the development. In the midst of reflecting the place of literary dynamics in society, the playwrights then made the Nigerian drama a social action against the wantonness of the new society generated from such events. Issues, such as mismanagement of public funds, corruption in public offices, violence, ethno-centricism etc. became prominently enacted as they continued to resurface and pollute the fragile and peaceful environment of the nation. The dramatists are seen to interrogate, through their respective dramatic output, the socio-political fluxes that characterized the state of the nation; for their art, which remains a literary manifestation that is closely connected with action, can be most suitable tool for the writer with socio-political and cultural transformation of the human space at the back of his/her mind. As such, "as the consciences of their societies, 'Nigerian' writers have in varying degrees, painstakingly at the risk of lives, exposed without fear or favour, injustices, corruption, abuse of human rights, gender inequalities, degradation of womanhood... domestic violence, child abuse and trafficking, and other forms of crimes against humanity at the hands of rulers or the ruled".

In the course of the critical disposition towards drama in Nigeria, Nigerian playwrights are categorized by critics into "first or the second generations of writers both in chronology and in terms of the dramatic vision" as Olu Obafemi postulated in *Contemporary Nigeria Theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision*. This simply means that the categorization is assessed on the basis of artistic vision and practices. The first generation of playwrights has Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, J. P. Clark whose visions are intertwined with cultural, traditional and metaphysical paradigms: myths, rituals, more with continuity and the issues of life and death. In some quarters, the works of the first generation of playwrights are identified with the escapist literature, which is seen as not been able to address the realities recognized in the social system and as such failed to grapple with meaningful ways with the solutions to the perceived problems of the

society.

The second generation of playwrights, who came into existence during the post-civil war period in Nigeria, presented the dramatic platform which deals with contemporary social problems, which Obafemi argued, have the aim of raising mass awareness of a positive revolutionary alternative to the decadence of the society through collectivism among the people. Within this group of playwrights are the likes of Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande, Olu Obafemi, Kole Omotosho, Tess Onwueme and Stella Oyedepo. They remained as playwrights who are consciously and ideologically committed to the socialist cause, where it is deduced that man's problems originate from man himself and the solutions to the problems must be accessed by man alone and not any metaphysical realm or the gods. This premised drama to be a vital and relevant instrument for social mobilization, orientation and rejuvenation.

Through the dynamics of the second generation playwrights, there is the education of the oppressed and suppressed in the society as well as the conditioning of the minds towards the humanistic relevance. It is this consciousness that brought functionality in drama. Obafemi contends that “the conscious ideological commitment of the younger dramatists in Nigeria is the significant point of departure between them and the first generation of dramatists .... Their work deals urgently with contemporary social problems in Nigeria with the aim of raising mass awareness of a positive revolutionary alternative to the present decadence”. (168).

Then came to bear on the Nigerian dramatic writing the category of the new generation of playwrights that emerged. They are described as “new voices”. They rendered their voices to the discussion of contemporary matters as arising in the social frontiers. Most of them are realized as female playwrights. The emergence of these female dramatic creators becomes a new and welcome development as it paved way for a more robust creativity within the Nigerian space. These female playwrights are perceived to deploy their works in a committed quest for the actualization of an equitable society. They do not believe that drama only holds “mirror” to the society but the fact that as it holds the mirror, it should also put the way forward. To this category of Nigerian dramatists, it is not enough for drama to expose societal ills and suggest possible solutions without advocating for gross active involvement of the people to see the problems(s) solved and sustain the new status quo. Likewise, these female playwrights reflect moral anomic besieging the societal issues and leveraging on the posture of questioning the political and social structures of the immediate post contemporary space.

The new voices of female playwrights have been perceived to articulate diverse thematic attitudes with contemporary indices forming their literary/dramatic backdrop. Interestingly, they are not exactly leaning concretely on the pillars of gender or the notions of feminism but rather they have tried to release the hold of such gendered critique in their creative hands to embrace the holistic dimension of creative writing. Their experiences added to the general socio-political temperaments have accumulated to form the artistic realities of their plays.

In spite of these recognized impulses, the female playwrights' creative contributions have not always been recognized in the midst of the canons of Nigerian drama. Adeola James' *In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk* reacts that “their important contributions until recently, has been only grudgingly acknowledged...” (2)

Based on the realization that the Nigerian female dramatists have started to emerge vocally, powerfully and more visibly, based on the navigation of the creative terrain to re-launch themselves rather than complaining the lack of critical support, one cannot overlook or dismiss the relevance as well as the output of Tracie Utoh – Ezeajugh as an emergent (new) voice for the sustainable Nigerian society. The need for the interrogation of the plays of this refined playwright cannot be over – emphasized since she has unequivocally engaged the realities of the times in her dramatic expressions. She has dedicated her literary energy in explicating the social problems beyond the generally accepted notion of gender constructions. This is perhaps with her understanding that even though it has been established that Nigerian playwrights are strongly involved in gendered engagements as a platform to engender social transformation, it is quite purposeful to write about or navigate the human existence for the discovery of more holistic and pragmatic perceptions.

The landscape of contemporary Nigerian drama has been populated by diverse but deliberate angles of engagements; diverse in terms of the pragmatic portrayals of experiences, events and situations manifest due to personal ideologies and deliberate due to the efforts and decision to tell a common story which will directly affect the psyche of the general society; “that is interested in impacting on the minds of the people, moulding them, focusing on the challenges that we are confronted with”. (Osofisan 254) Within that space, there are recognized female creativity which have not been adequately harnessed especially in critical output. This is succinctly proved by the argument of Irene Salami – Agunloye, who submits that “although much has been written about the post-colonial (African) theatre, there is still a paucity of critical works on African women and their theatre”, (xiv) She, further, reveals that, “...most of the writings have been in the area of prose, ....” (xiv)

As such, there is the need to employ the process of critical discourse in creating the needed awareness of the tenacity expressed by a female playwright Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh to use her dramatic engagement as a means of social growth and development and political/cultural reawakening. In effect, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's plays serve the artistic platform to transverse the terrain and find her thematic profundity as the case may be.

Invariably, apart from Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme, very little has been heard critically about other female playwrights and most studies of female writing focus on the presentation of women in these creative works without the bent towards a more holistic analysis of the plays. Thus, the study is to create an interface with the plays of Tracie Utoh – Ezeajugh, which will produce a formidable creative attitude, representative of the “varying shades and colours of human temperaments”. The study deconstructs the perception that basically all that the female playwrights produce is gendered or feminist in nature; thereby creating 'trivialities' around the needed study of the plays. Thus, the purpose of the paper is to use the themes, thoughts or ideas postulated to create the pragmatic relevance of the plays

#### **A Short Bio Data of the Playwright**

Tracie Utoh – Ezeajugh, also known as Tracie Chima Utoh, is a Nigerian playwright and an expert in Film and Theatre Design. She has served as a Head, Department of Theatre

and Film Studies at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, a Dean, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, a member of the National Universities Commission (NUC) National Technical Committee on Nigerian Universities Arts & Culture Festival. She is a Rockefeller Fellow, an AHP Post-Doctorate Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and a member of several professional bodies, including African Theatre Association (AFTA), Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), and Society of Nigeria Theatre Artists (SONTA). Her areas of specialization include Costume and Make-Up, Film Production/Design, Gender Studies, Children Literature and Music. She is currently an elected member of the Governing Council, Nnamdi Azikiwe University. Being a playwright/dramatist, she has written over ten plays; *Forest of Palm Trees*; *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!*; *Everyday is for the Thief*; *Cauldron of Death*; *Who Owns this Coffin?* *The Night of a Thousand Truths and Forest of Palmtrees*; *Out of the Mask*, *Nneora: An African Doll's House and Olamma*. She has also articles and book chapters which compliment her creative output.

### **New Voices in Dramatic Representation**

In the midst of the artistic navigation of the polity of the Nigerian state by the early dramatists, that is the first and second generations of writers, there became a new trend or generation of playwrights emerging on the Nigerian literary scene. This group of playwrights are referred to as the “new voices”. The group appears to defy any classification along the hard-core ideological lines of socialism or capitalism as found in the earlier generational clusters. This new breed of playwrights tends to address purely socio-cultural issues of the present time space and they have the qualities that distinguish them from their fore-bears (Asigbo & Okeke). Then came to bear on the dramatic space is the group of emergent playwrights, which Ameh Akoh presents thus, the first generation of early post-independence conventional. playwrights, the post-civil war radical playwrights whose subject matter became the then running battle between capitalism and socialism and the fronting for the latter in their ideological confrontation, the middle generation which emerged in the dying days of Marxism as Praxis, ... This last category has been christened the new voices in Nigerian drama (264).

In their abstract to the article, *Recent Nigerian Playwriting and Collapse of Ideology*, Alex Asigbo and Tochukwu Okeke reflect that, “the recent or new breed of Nigerian playwrights appear to towing the lines of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen who addressed purely socio-cultural issues of his generation”. (1). Also, Asigbo and Utoh-Ezeajuagh state that, “this generation ... constructs their plays; ... not just along class struggle but along moral and ethical lines ... (3).

Hence, the contemporary Nigerian drama has experienced remarkable growth as new voices and styles are reshaping the literary landscape. The emerging playwrights are seen bringing fresh perspectives through innovative approaches. From their ideological standpoint, there are so many “wrongs” to be corrected in contemporary Nigerian society. They moved from the formalist perspective which has to do with the structure of language and content as the angle of motivation for form. In fact, their commitment, according to Afolayan and Adeleke, is “the penchant for humanistic mission”. (10) In support of the idea of commitment to literature, Femi Osofisan in an interview with Thomas Bruckner, “...of theme, that is, a literature that will be socially useful, that will

deal with the relevant problems of our society as of now. Political problems, social problems, and so on... I am speaking, as you can see, of a broad interpretation of the term "commitment". (28)

### **Dramatic Engagement**

Conceptually, drama, as a literary genre, that is closely connected with action can be the most suitable tool for the writer with societal transformation at the back of his/her mind. It draws attention and attracts interests since people are naturally curious in nature and want to watch actions as they unfold especially when they happen to others. Thus, Tracie Utoh- Ezeajugh reveals the whole essence of drama as such:

we are guided through a maze of proven strategies that ultimately push away the 'us' and bring in the 'other'. We therefore lose our personalities, so as to pick up the personalities of others for some moments, minutes or hours. And within those minutes, or hours, to go on and become who we are not, to carry out the act of impersonation, to put on the personality of another and claim that the personality belongs to the actor putting it on. But then, is that not the whole essence of drama? (4)

As the melting point of all the imaginative arts, drama demands keen observation of the socio-ideological trends in the wider society. One cannot run away from the fact that drama has influenced the conscience of humans especially due to its capacity to emotionally and still rationally arouse man. As such, the use of drama as a means of propagating ideologies and struggles for the control of conscience of man has been acknowledged in critical quarters. Of course, drama, in its critical position in the family of arts, is life. Life is drama because drama touches on all spheres of existence and pursuits. Dramatists have used their dramatic ingenuity to comment on political, social, economic and security challenges in their societies over the years. They do this in order to chart the way forward for a stable political, economic and social system.

### **Thematic Aesthetics**

In recognition of the place of the thematic disposition of a work of art, the theme is as such perceived as the creation of readers and of the writer. Readers' backgrounds, knowledge, values, and beliefs all play a part in determining the theme or themes they will identify in a work. To pinpoint the theme of a work of literature, active readers must absorb the facts of a story while asking what the facts signify. The more familiar the reader is with a story as a whole, the better the chances of determining its theme(s). Also, often the theme of a story or novel is not clear until the end. Even then the theme is not always easy to identify. Rich works create difficulty in the readers agreeing on their themes as they may have several complementary themes. Themes are not usually stated directly. It could be *implied* or *implicit* and this means that the reader determines the central idea by analyzing other story elements such as the setting, characters, plot and point of view through an inference, or educated guess. When explicitly stated, it is the one the writer who puts such central idea directly into words. Summarily, the identification of a theme of a fictional work should involve the convergence of attitudes into a general idea which transcends the world outside the story.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The research paper adopts the pragmatic approach which was advocated by Ezenwa Ohaeto in *The Contours of Criticism: Subject, Context and the Contours of Nigerian Fiction*. The pragmatic approach postulates the utilization of the sociological, aesthetic, and moralistic approaches; all of them blended to produce practical results. In this pragmatic criticism, according to Ezenwa Ohaeto, the various aspects of creativity are taken into account by the critic who must be sensitive and perceptive depending on his understanding of the writer, the society, and the vision in the work that is being considered. In the instance of sociological ideology, it is geared at understanding the composition of the playwright's work within its social context. Dimensionally, the paper will be theoretically interpreted through the analysis which comprehends the textual maneuvering to present the various realities in the contemporary society.

### **Literature Review**

The review is an effort to recognize what have been in the range of critical attitudes as brief as possible. At the first instance, Femi Osofisan, in a keynote address delivered at the Second International Women Writers Forum organized by the Women Writers of Nigeria, observed that women have risen to “enlighten men, as well as discover and nurture into lime light as many female writers as possible, in order to bring the female voice into hitherto male monologue of History and Literary Creativity” (Obi 81). Thus, it is impressed that some female playwrights are set to communicate their experiences and use that to explore the issues which affect the society in its entirety irrespective of gender while some others deliberately write along the gendered lines. In fact, Osita Ezenwanebe throws a light on that by saying that “the role of empowered women in national and human development is to transform the patriarchal, capitalist, cyber world with the gemstone womanhood”. This is even though that renowned female writers have complained that the “creative contribution of African women writers has not always been recognized...”. When recognized, their important contributions' until recently, has been only grudgingly acknowledged...” (Adeola 2). In support of the assertion, Rebecca Abraham thinks that those few African women that are writing today are not receiving the nurturing attention necessary for emerging writers (34). Interestingly, the renowned writer, Flora Nwapa reflects that “you are killing that writer if you don't even talk about her. Tobe ignored is worse than when you are writing trash about her” (Adeola3).

On the other hand, Mabel Evwierhoma, purposefully, felt aggrieved by the low status of female dramatists and playwrights which constitutes the imbalance observed in the midst of the number of male dramatists. She believes that there is the urgent need to correct the imbalance such that the future has to be collaborative efforts by women in the area of theorizing women-centered dramatic enactment. The dearth of female writers, according to her, emphasizes the need for the few female writers to emphasize on women –centered ideologies in their writing. She posits that just as a mother can be regarded as a role model, female dramatists help to propagate a female identity that does not undermine the male identity. This is succinctly asserted by Rolf Solberg who recommends that “one of the ways of correcting one's faulty image of the African woman would be through the African woman seen from the “inside”, in other words, rendered by women” (249).

All the same, the Nigerian female playwrights are seen taking the challenge to a greater height by granting their voices to articulate the issues and matters affecting the womenfolk within their existential circle and the exterior space of public interest. The angle from which reality is presented by these female playwrights differs from one dramatist to another according to her socio-cultural milieu. Yet, they are united by the countenance of disenchantment brought by the contradiction in society and they seek to use drama to establish the platform for the society to be reconstructed, readjusted and rectified along the lines of growth and development in general. Agreeing to the above observations, Eziwo Azunwo and Ejiro Omovwimo reflect that “one of the assertions that gave rise to the emergence of female dramatists is the need for women to express themselves through the medium of drama. Female dramatists have made it a point of duty to use the theatre as a vehicle for transformation and raising women's consciousness”. (3)

Contributing his take on the place of the female playwrights in his critical work *Radical Drama in Nigeria*, Saint Gbilekaa, reacts that, “in the realm of the Arts, a new breed of playwrights arose to challenge this exploitation of the masses of the people by the ruling elite. This new breed of writers and indeed some of the old school broke away from the old order of playwriting which was “static and bizarre...peopled with desperado protagonists, helpless victims of fate who cannot deliver themselves” (1). Whereas Irene Isoken Salami- Agunloye finds satisfaction in the understanding that, “ in recent years, these women writers have had a glaring record of dazzling achievements having made their creativity a relevant aspect of dramatic theory and criticism and as such can no longer be pushed aside or left acknowledgment.”(123)

In addition, articulating the modern Nigerian drama and its generation of playwrights, Alex Roy-Omoni stipulates that “the new millennium has ushered in the fourth generation of Nigerian playwrights.... as for their thematic preoccupation... is characterized by “a proliferation of, some of which themes, some of which would have been incapable of securing slots of any special worth in earlier generations of Nigerian drama. These writers write on different issues 'from all angles'. There is no manifesto that guards the new writings. Writers are free to write on any area of human endeavours” (15). He then concluded that the fourth generation does not have a major thematic underpinning. Rather, it discusses various issues from domestic violence, child abuse, examination malpractice, marital problems, environmental degradation, and incorporation of oral elements in their writings to mention a few. (15)

Fundamentally, in his discursive pattern towards the female playwriting in Nigeria, Jeremiah. S. Methuselah argues through *Women Playwrights and Female Imaging in Nigerian Literary Drama: An Overview* that Irene Salami's *More than Dancing* and Chima Utoh's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again* showcases strong women characters who venture into the world of politics, an area that is known to be the sole preserve of men, and defeated their male rivals.... In the case of Irene and her friends in *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again* she used the most unconventional methods to secure the presidential ticket. Once again is Chima Utoh is making a point on behalf of women which seems to suggest that what a man can do a woman can equally achieve. (14)

Earlier in *Women Playwrights...*, Methuselah, quoting Morgan Paula, presents thus, “through the works of Onwueme and later female playwrights, we gain insights into the thematic preoccupation of women writers. Basically most of these writings are a reaction of what women consider to be a skewed representation of themselves in male authored works. Most plays by women are therefore “concerned with reversing the process of denigration, disfigurement, self-contempt and erasure”. (Morgan 98) Other issues imminent in female authored works, according to Methuselah, include the following: deliberately subverts male hegemony by reversing roles in their plays. In this case, women, who hitherto, occupied menial, unimportant roles, are ensconced in big time titanic roles while men peep from the rear; projects certain cultural practices that are anti women and condemning same while at the same time calling for their abolition; criticizes patriarchy and male egotism which socially constructs women as inferior to men; agitate for social justice; project women as being of equal intelligence and disposition with men; celebrates culture and agitates for its preservation in its fixed putative state; social enlightenment. Most of these themes run through the gamut of many women's works. But the role of the woman in all these is central because most of the stories are woven around them. (10)

Reacting to the presentation of characters of revolt in the works of the later female playwrights as well as the trends of Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's plays, Methuselah argues that:

The characters in the plays of these contemporary women playwrights are empowered to fight back. Though not in all occasions, by and large they succeed in portraying women as the injured party in a society that gives them little space to develop themselves. We are presented with a highly militant picture of women in .... In the same vein Tracie Chimah Utoh's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again* displays women in this form of militancy. (13) Irene Isoken Salami- Agunloye, leveraging on the discussion of the place of the female playwrights, discloses that “When women are projected from a male's perspective and imbibed by the readers and audience, the ideas are difficult to erase. Writers like Tess Onwueme... Tracie Utoh- Ezeajugh and Stella Oyedepo are aware of these ill-conceived notions, which they try to challenge and reframe by recreating popular, more positive images and portraiture discarding the old images, which had surrounded and defined them”. (121)

Reacting, Grace Itoro Ibanga in her article *Feminism and Human Rights in Utoh-Ezeajugh's Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again and Femi Osofisan's Yungba-Yungba and The Dance Contest* reveals that the purpose of the paper is not to enlist the characteristics of the different kinds of feminism; instead, it seeks to examine how Tracie Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh and Femi Osofisan have employed the dramatic genre to propagate the feminist mission of change, as well as stimulate women in the Nigerian society to work for the better future for their female estates (170-187). While interrogating *Gender Reversals: Men's Emasculation in Tracie Chima's Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again and Tess Onwueme's The Reign of Wazobia*, Beatrice Nwawuloke Onuoha, determines that two plays, in question, dramatize masculinity in relation to modern perceptions that contrasts it with the traditional patriarchal definition of man and woman. She, further, reveals that Tracie and Tess, through the portrayal of their male and female characters, unthinks, challenges and deconstructs the essentialist' perspectives of a man's definition.

As such, for Grace Ito Ibanga, “their portrayal of a man deconstructs the normalized thinking of the patriarchal male figure that is rooted in essentialist assumptions that a man is aggressive, a decision maker, a provider and his authority cannot be questioned by a woman”. (170-187)

Salami- Agunloye, instructively, argues that Utoh's (Ezeajugh) writing centers on issues of women who use the feminist struggle to their advantage.... Using the feminist struggle as a means for self-enrichment is wrong against all the values of the genuine feminist struggle. However, Chima's criticism should not cloak real issues that seek to be addressed in the struggle for female emancipation”. (128) Despite the above impression made by Salami- Agunloye, she remarks that “however, in recent times, Ezeajugh's writings now focuses on the objectification of women. (128) She places the thought of the work being designed in such a way that Tracie Utoh reverses the traditional roles in the society where men play the role of women/ wives and vice versa where they are subjugated and suppressed. (Salami- Agunloye, 140)

### **Interrogating the Thematic Trends of Tracie Utoh – Ezeajugh's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!* and *Nneora: An African Doll's House***

*Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!* presents different urban families in a Nigerian socio-political environment where there is the presence of supremacy crisis and betrayals. There is the attempt by the female characters in the play to have superior control either as wives or as politicians. The women, driven by their own grievances, decide to take matters into their hands, using a variety of approaches, including physical violence to subvert the perceived male dominance. Ene is seen frustrating her husband Inyang in their marriage by taking control of the family's finances and social life; Chief Irene divorces her husband Felix in order to marry Gambo whom she manipulates in her quest for political ambition and Ifeoma, a wealthy businesswoman, kills a rival, Zeus, during a fight and manipulates a police officer to protect her from prosecution.

#### **Dramatic Engagement Along Humanistic Lines**

Since the creation of the world, dramatic enactment has lent itself a strong and viable voice to the trends of human existence, consciousness and experience. It remained a critical platform for the portrayal of truth within the ambit of artistic expression. As such, Tracie Utoh – Ezeajugh, recognizing this profound opportunity given by the dramatic piece, with *Our Wives Have Gone Mad*, created an avenue for the interrogation of the essence of women being in positions of authority or power. She, effectively deployed women characters who serve as parodies of male chauvinism and misconceptions of feminism. These women characters are given the violent attributes with the enactment of male chauvinistic attitudes. It becomes ironical that these women turn out to be representatives of the same attitudinal tendencies that men have criticized for and which women have antagonized within the feminist interrogation. The irrationalities engulfing the process of application of the feminist concepts makes the whole situation ironical.

*Our Wives...* seems to be a dramatic platform to trivialize the potency of feminist ideals and soften the hard contents of feminist engagements. The playwright, thus, appears to create a reverse of male chauvinism in order to create a deconstructed perspective of the women characters. For Tracie Utoh – Ezeajugh to have made a reverse of the characters, simply foretells that feminism is a concept which relates to everybody despite sexual

orientation or dimension. This is because the nature to act in such manner's men are most often criticized for applies to both men and women as long as power or exercise of authority is involved.

Utoh, in her efforts to present the women in a different context, is able to present female characters who employ negative methods of dethroning male oppression and supremacy in the Nigerian society. In tandem, Izuu Nwankwo, in *Creative Artist: A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies* states that Utoh “exhibits a profound proclivity towards the reiteration of humanist agitation (rather than feminist) which aims at rechanneling literary emphasis to more debilitating phenomena in contemporary society other than the re-inscription of gendered disputations”. (170)

He, further, articulates that Utoh – Ezeajugh's social consciousness as a writer holds gargantuan relevance for the unification of both men and women in the fight against global malaise such as hunger/poverty/famine, HIV/AIDS, human trafficking, wars, promiscuity, and other sundry problems.” His emphasis notes that “this unity has become extremely relevant because the quest for better living condition for all humanity is one that essentially involves men and women”. The women in *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!* are Ene, Irene, Funmi, Mairo and Ifeoma. They are consciously portrayed as women, who have no regards for their men and hence label them as different grades and degrees of imbeciles, “necessary evils” (23) and further as “good – for – nothing piece of liability” (Our Wives...32). Their mission is to take charge and dominate the men completely. Their formation of an 'interest group' is to create a domineering posture and this involved physical reality as depicted by Utoh is to present the women who break all the rules of decent political behaviour and turn political activities into oppressive and dehumanizing affairs.

These women characters are used by the playwright to reflect the bunch of charlatans and sadists exhibiting their ignorance of what the idea of humanism represents. Utoh, who may be very realistic in this gloomy portrayal based on the social realities of our times, have transferred patriarchal attitudes to the female characters in order to achieve her purpose of multilaterally tackling issues.

Utoh is not trying to make a mere narration in dramatic form but rather interpreting events in order to achieve the x-ray of socio-political and even spiritual state of the society as being experienced in the contemporary times. The name – calling extended by Ene is seen as over – reacting. To her, Inyang is a “lazy idiot” and useless too. He is not just termed 'lazy', but he is also classified as an 'enunch’. Ene posits that he, Inyang, cannot even impregnate her. Another punch is thrown at Inyang, which states that Ene “gave him money to pay her dowry” and “sponsored the traditional marriage and the church wedding”. Many other offensive remarks were made at the personality of Inyang without any decorum. Funmi stands in support of Ene's verbal and emotional abuse of her husband since she could say:

Funmi: Ene my sister, we all have different grades and degrees of imbeciles in our homes but what shall we do? (23)

She goes even went further to state that “men are necessary evils or so they say”. (23)

*Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!* is, of course, a deliberate attempt by Tracie Chima Utoh – Ezeajugh to navigate the submission that no human being; be it man or woman,

has the monopoly of oppression especially in situations of unrestrained power and authority. As the play presents, men are also victims of oppression, misused economic power and manipulative tendencies of the human nature.

In fact, Tracie Utoh consciously makes all the men in the play to be economically dependent on their wives contrary to the stereotyped picture painted of men being the breadwinners and their wives' dependent on them. She gives the scenario of Zeus Longpole, the husband of IfeomaEze Long pole, who do not hold up to his 'presumed' responsibilities of paying house rent, children's school fees or contributing to the house keep as the case may be. This is exemplified in the words of Ifeoma during her visit to the Mpangs' house:

... Yet I shoulder all the responsibility the house. I pay the children's school fees. I pay the house rent, the electricity bill, the water bill ... I buy the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the car we drive ... I pay for every single thing in the house". (30)

Even Odera, Mairo's husband is also dependent on his wife and would even steal from her.

In this period, the greatest number of plays highlights the "prey and predator" motif. This is a situation where a woman is placed at the wall of an insensitive, unfaithful, and uncaring spouse. The husband is a callous brute always at the neck of his wife who is presented as faithful, caring, loving and calm. He disregards her feeling, stepping on her emotions, and doing with her whatever he wants. Most of these female dramatists have written at least one play on this subject and have presented women in this way.

On the other hand, Utoh parodies the agonizing fate of a childless women in a society dominated by men by using Inyang being characterized as impotent and therefore "useless'. The general idea of infertility is woman-oriented with the bulk of blame being placed on her table with the man exonerated. But Utoh shifts the paradigm to accommodate both sexes in the understanding. Invariably, the scene serves as a parody of such portrayal as perceived in the content of African nay Nigerian fictional art.

With *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again!* Utoh characterizes the female characters as symbolic of the misappropriation and misconception of feminism. Irene, Ifeoma, Funmi, Ene, and Mairo are used to show that there are misconceptions of what feminism entails. This is because they interpret it the wrong way by extending to the men the same level and manner of subjugation and exploitation 'supposedly' meted out on women. They are not revolutionary but rebellious as well as violent in their attempt to establish the 'feminist' ethos within their existence. They do not want to be 'under' men whom they called "necessary evils." The maltreatment of the male characters also represents the level of subjugation of the populace where the women hold the power to 'do' and 'undo'.

In the preface to *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again*, Ezenwa Ohaeto says that "several functional and significant female characters ... are portrayed in artistic way that generate insight on human relationships and inter gender interactions". This is actually the position Tracie Utoh takes in giving these women their roles. The way the playwright presents these women characters can be deduced as satirical. They are satirized as being extreme and exercising lack of emotion. They deprive themselves of the spirit of womanhood – a mother who has great level of qualities. In this dramatic space, Utoh, hence, employs the satiric mode in form of irony and outright deviation to expose, and ridicule these characteristics exhibited by the women in the play.

However, in the divergent critical discourse, Azunwo and Omovwiomo notes that in this period of the emergent playwriting, “the greatest number of plays highlights the “prey and predator” motif. This is a situation where a woman is placed at the wall of an insensitive, unfaithful, and uncaring spouse. The husband is a callous brute always at the neck of his wife who is presented as faithful, caring, loving. And calm. He disregards her feeling, stepping on her emotions, and doing with her whatever he wants. Most of these female dramatists have written at least one play on this subject and have presented women in this way.” (9)

Interrogating another thematic antecedent, Utoh paints a picture of the socio-political realities in the society – corruption, decadent political culture, graft and moral confusion. She satirizes the credibility of the political practitioners including the active participants as well as the followers. In so doing, the playwright shows that ... believes in the moral function of satire as an instrument for correcting all those deviations. (Bamidele19). She takes a swipe at the political situation as viewed from the Nigerian society. She makes the play as a satire to expose the condition and suffering of the society in a state of confusion evident in the characters' attitudes. Utoh, also goes further with the trade of exposing the underside of some feminists. She presents these political, participants as 'feminist activists, who exploit women liberation for personal and selfish gains. They are then exposed within the context of the play as charlatans, social misfit, morally debased women whose stock in trade is to violently antagonize their husbands in order to sustain their ego. She, likewise, ridicules the autocratic nature of the women in the play coupled with their sense of language. The vulgarity exhibited is satirized. Even though, she satirizes women engaged in politics, it is understood that she is not out-rightly disparaging them for so doing. Rather she discourages the absurdity of their involvement in dirty politics which is seen in the women's discussion at the location they were:

Ene: ... They have a bar attendant who doubles as a part-time prostitute. It is not a very reputable place but it will serve our purpose for today (41).

Also,

Mairo: Politics without money is equivalent to child's play. Every position has its price the highest bidder wins. There is no sentiment about this.” (42).

There is the close relationship between Madam Omeaku of *A Parliament of Vultures* and the female characters of *Our Wives...*; for there is the loss of value and self-worth-being bosses over their husbands and neglect of family duties as mothers and wives. An assertion by Olympus Ejue seems to be an overriding factor in the power of Utoh-Ezeajugh to tackle these women and their actions based on the fact the playwright is also a woman. Ejue says that “the challenges of projecting female characters in a vantage position over their male counterparts have been very daunting”. (35)

The playwright creates such graphic picture of the bar with the dramatic intent to portray the dirtiness or filthy nature of the discussions they are about to have. These are women who are preparing the ground for leadership of the nation. This, as well, calls for the determination of the quality of the political gladiators of the general political milieu bearing in the mind that cleanliness is next to godliness'. In support with the assertion, Ezenwa Ohaeto argues further that, “the women in the play turn their attention to politics where they break all the rules of decent political activities into oppressive and dehumanizing affairs”. (11) In fact, the play reveals the preparatory class for political corruption.

The depiction of the society with emphasis on its moral codes of conduct is intentionally made to illustrate the dangers inherent in going against this code of conduct because as Izuu Nwankwo remarks, “a society that holds strongly to its moral precepts and customs is a stable society and this stability can only be achieved by adhering to societal norms.” (45). Of course, drama remains the convenient space where these socio-ideological precepts are convincingly portrayed in order to generate contemporary self-examination. The postulation of Asigbo and Okeke that “playwriting as an art deals with the intricacies involved in creatively putting on paper in the form of drama, ideas for the edification of man” agrees with the dramatization of the family relationship and the contemporary realities.

On another critical platform, Tracie Utoh heavily indicts the position of some female personalities in the corruption which eroded the general polity. The theme of corruption is decisively portrayed in *Our Wives ...!* as being rooted in the political system and the surrounding environment. The women, as presented in the play, embraced politics and thereafter deviated from all the rules of decent engagement in the process. Of course, their political process and the attendant activities become oppressive. Satire now becomes a dramatic tool in the hands of the playwright where such women are satirized for engaging in politics 'indecently'. The women can be described as corrupt since they feel “politics without money is a child's play” (42) and “with the right amount of money we can buy the presidential ticket.” (42). This articulates, metaphorically, the general content of politics in the Nigerian milieu as evident with the level of decadence employed in the electioneering process. For while, decency and great sense of propriety is not lost in the scheme of political machinery in the nation. It is discovered that greater percentage of those involved have failed to live up to the standard expectations.

On the other hand, assassination is to be an instrument of political machinery since they will eliminate the opposition where blackmail fails to make them (the opposition) 'fall in line'. They, further, in the play prepare to blackmail their opponents by arranging for twelve girls through Rosandra, a prostitute. This represents the trend as obtainable in the general circle of interests whether politics, leadership tussle, religious dimensions and even family squabbles. Rosandra is to be rewarded with the position of “Minister for Teenage Affairs” which is not based on merit. On a dramatic note, such position is absurd, providing the atmosphere to ridicule the political class for frivolous life style. The exposure granted to how politicians acquire positions of authority in the government parastatals is of course to satirize. Utoh positions the qualified persons in a tight corner as they fail to get the chance of leadership in the political realm and as such, the unqualified enjoy the patronage as well as prepare the ground for maladministration.

In a particular instance, the use of Rosandra in the play betrays the governed as accomplices in the crimes of maladministration, dirty politics, nepotism, political assassination, cyberstalking and bullying as experienced in our polity as a nation. Her job as a prostitute reveals the decay even in the sphere of the downtrodden perhaps caused by the activities of those in power who have not created the level playing ground. Corruption in the security apparatus is equally regarded as an issue to be reformed through dramatic communication. Ifeoma, who killed Zeus by cutting off his genital, tries to offer gratification to the police through Irene and this succeeded.

Of course, it is a social reality being enacted that the conversation that followed reflects the comprehensive level of moral decay found within the 'being' of the polity. This manifests as incriminating evidence being planted on people who are innocent in order to trump up charges against them and thereafter prosecute and sentence them, in order to cover up 'original' crimes and their perpetrators. Based on the impressions made on this play, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh is seen in a decisive effort to dramatize the lopsidedness of the society in order to effect a change for equitable allocation of common good and governance.

### ***Nneora: An African Doll's House: Synopsis***

In the play, Nneora comes to the aid of an unemployed graduate of Law, Ikenna, by paying his debts and as well as promising to help secure a job for him through her lover and benefactor, Osita. She is able to deceive Osita into believing that Ikenna is her cousin. Ikenna finds a job in a bank through the assistance of Osita. Nneora and Ikenna later married. Ikenna was also sponsored by Osita through Nneora's intervention. Ikenna is informed about a letter kept in his office drawer which contains important revelations about someone dear to him. Meanwhile Nneora faces blackmail in the hands of Osita who seems deceived by her actions and he swears to tell lies about Nneora to her husband. Nneora, of course, becomes disturbed about the content of the letter. Prior to this development, Ikenna is unhappy due to the fact they have four daughters without any male child. The girls start to irritate him as he sees them as "noisy". Nneora, on her part, encounters a friend of her, Linda, who narrates her ordeal in the hands of her estranged husband, who turns to be Osita. She also reveals that she is in town to find her husband who is now a changed man.

At that point, Nneora, who is threatened by Osita, reveals her affair with him before her marriage to Ikenna. Osita becomes a visible threat caused by her earlier betrayal. Of course, the letter finally gets to Ikenna and he finds the truth about the hospital bills' payment. This creates a serious fuss. At this point, Linda enters with Osita, who apologizes for his blackmail as he became repentant. He reveals that his action is borne out of envy and that Nneora remained faithful in her marriage to Ikenna all the while. Linda on the other hand reveals that Nneora is carrying twin baby boys in her pregnancy. At that point, Ikenna extends forgiveness to her, Nneora, after realizing that his position, moral and social status is no longer under threat. Nneora, despite Ikenna's position, declares her unwillingness to continue in her marriage to him especially because of his lack of love from him. Nneora leaves the house.

### **Deterministic Trend in Social Vision**

This second play *Nneora: An African Doll's House* is acknowledged as an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. It is a dramatized piece which is presented in a unique manner. The playwright uses the play to present the African woman the way she is. The name 'Nneora', which in its interpretation means "mother of all" is symbolic of the character in the play. Utoh effectively adapts the female character Nora in *A Doll's House* into the Africanized Nneora. Tracie Utoh – Ezeajugh, in the blurb of the play states that the play "... is a study of the virtues of womanhood... an embodiment of all that is

virtuous in the quintessential woman. The central character, Nneora, is portrayed as submissive without being intimidated and subjugated. She remains assertive without being pugnacious. There was the self-realization when her virtues are being questioned by Ikenna. She did not allow her womanhood to be trampled upon, rather she, diplomatically, takes her exit. She exhibited high sense of motherhood marked by the compassionate spirit at the beginning and the middle of the story. With such attributes, she is effectively portrayed as a virtuous woman with outstanding qualities. In the first instance, Nneora helps Ikenna, even though a stranger, to pay his debt which amounts to Seven Hundred Naira and, as such, saves him from the hands of the creditor Mama Uduak, who has sworn to recover the money at all cost. She still got a job for him, Ikenna. Also, she helped in securing funds for his health treatment. These actions realistically portray her as someone with the 'milk of human kindness' but perhaps to a fault. Despite the fact that she has the opportunity to betray Ikenna by being amorous with Osita, she decided to abide with her marital vows. Osita had earlier given Nneora a condition before signing for the release of Three Million Naira for Ikenna's hospital treatment. Due to the fact that Nneora fails to meet Osita's condition and as he feels deceived, he trumps up falsehood towards her in the letter delivered to Ikenna. Despite Nneora's level of subservience, Ikenna remains self-centered and egocentric. The news of Nneora 'being pregnant with a set of male twins' and the revelation of her innocence did not move him as he remains adamant with his reaction. This, promptly brings out the resolute spirit in Nneora. She makes up her mind with much defiance:

Nneora: No! I can't bear to spend the night in a stranger's house. My freedom starts from this night. I will fly out like a bird. After my babies are born, I will re-organize my life. I will re-open my shop. From the proceeds, I will train my children and above all, I will teach them true love. Then of course, there is another task I must accomplish ... I must go back to school and struggle on till I get a degree. (123 - 124).

She realizes that she has been living in illusion with her husband who fails to understand the true nature of his wife and thus acts like a stranger for eight years and she swears she cannot stand one more night in that house. Her decision however contradicts the traditional ethics. In fact, according to Ngozi Udengwu, "her expressiveness in leading Ikenna into a love relationship that eventually culminates in their marriage is against tradition". (293).

Nneora is a character whom Utoh-Ezeajugh decides to give the strong will disposition. She is shown as being resilient as she refuses to let her predicament in marriage define her despite her earlier sense of invisibility and voicelessness. The dimension of not allowing the tenets of the society towards marriage is a strong hold of the playwright critical portrayal of the story of Nneora.

Utoh, using the world of the play, indicates the traditional sphere where there is a predominant preference of male child over the female child especially among the Igbo people extraction. Emeka Nwabueze in *Art and Artifice in Dramatic Literature: The Exciting New Comers* agrees that "the African traditional society believes that there is need to have a male child in marriage to continue the name of the family". (279) Lack of a male child, he posits, also helps in exacerbating the problem in the marriage. Ikenna wants a male child and this blinds him to the qualities of his female children he believes

that a man of his status inevitably needs a male child, without giving honour to the woman who helped him achieve that status or according her the status of being the builder of the family (Nwabueze 280).

Such is that Utoh-Ezeajugh have also produced the thematic imperative of the preference of male children which have also been sustained by other Nigerian writers in their works. This, of course, aligns Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh as a social crusader at tune with the nuances and cadences of the contemporary society. She portrays a female character who, 'like a character created as an archetype' is not held back by the dictates of the patriarchal society and is determined to create a new social order devoid of violence but laced with revolt.

### **Conclusion**

This study, inevitably, tried to present one of the emerging 'new voiced' playwrights, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, and her navigation of the contemporary world through the vocal disposition of her dramatic corpus. This is in the recognition that drama, as a melting point of the literary activities, demands keen observation of the socio- ideological trends in the wider society. Perhaps, because Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh has sufficient academic attainment as well as residing in the academic space, she has enough sensibilities to acquire diverse experiences to be navigate contemporary issues thematically. Tracie Utoh- Ezeajugh is considered in this study to have deviated from the previously known pattern of discourse thereby joining the acquisition of the 'new voices' clause to her dramaturgy. She is found also to be deconstructive and more appropriately a social critic since she galvanized for social justice within the gender space without the feminist nomenclature boldly attached. This simply mean that she made profound statements about the contemporary society than just the recurring feminist discourse.

Her themes are reflections of the society intended to reposition the psyche of the polity and philosophically navigate the bold need for social re-examination and rejuvenation. She showcased the direct desire to make use of drama towards the development of the society. Making use of satirical antecedents, Utoh- Ezeajugh, effectively, ridicules the contribution of some women to the decadence of the political system in Nigeria. The women are presented as sometimes the cause of their problems and also constitute problems to them. Men are not left out in the antagonism as the moral dimension of their character is brought forward.

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