

*Portrayal of New African Women in Post Colonial Nigeria in the Plays of Osonye  
Tess Onwueme*

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**Abstract**

Osonye Tess Onwueme is the only Nigerian dramatist who presents the concept of 'New African Women' in renewed light where her women characters are confident, educated, and rebellious. Her characters strongly believe in the ideology of 'womanism', a product of African traditional perspective. Further it helps to understand the cause and effect of socio-political and cultural events in post-colonial African setting, including traditional values, intra-gender conflict and African Diaspora. The present paper critically analyses the rebellious portrayal of African Igbo women in post-colonial Nigeria, especially the paper explores the rebellious and strong women characters through the light of socio-political, economic and cultural upheavals. In particular, the paper would analyze women characters from selected plays, *What Mama Said* (2003), *Then She Said it* (2002), and *The Missing Face* (2002) which extensively explores from cultural studies, gender narratives and post – colonial theory. To analyze the plays, the paper would adopt qualitative method, including narrative and descriptive approach, which would enable to study, interpret and analyze the given characters in terms of sexual assault, norms discrimination, and culture.

Key words: Osonye Tess Onwueme, Post-Colonial Nigeria, New African Women, African Diaspora

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## Introduction

Rooted in colonial power and prejudice, post colonialism develops from a four-thousand-year history of strained cultural relations among colonies in Africa, Asia and the Western world. Post-colonial literature comes from Britain's former colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and India. Many post-colonial writers write in English and focus on common themes such as the struggle for independence, emigration, national identity and allegiance. As postcolonial critics point out, to be colonized is “to be removed from history”. In its interaction with the conquering culture, the colonized or indigenous culture is forced to go underground or to be obliterated. African drama has its origin in early 20<sup>th</sup> century logos- music theatre in European music. African male writers, (along with a number of African scholars) sought to present the truth of their cultures as a direct rebuttal to the distortions perpetuated by colonial missionaries, anthropologists and sociologists.

In their writing, the image of women was in some ways and to an extent rehabilitated, but in many cases, new sexist stereotypes were created, and older African ones went unchallenged. Further, the earlier European academicians, followed male –oriented mode of evaluating African literature, for which Ellman defines it as ‘phallic criticism’ because it completely excluded a host of women –oriented configuration. These attitudes in the literature were continued, ironically even among women critics like Lilyan Kestellot, Molly Mahhod and later Omolara Ogundipe- Leslie, who contributed to journals and early anthologists, like their male contemporaries who totally neglected the women in African’s literature.

Osonye Tess Onwueme is the only Nigerian dramatist who presents the concept of ‘New African Women’ in renewed light where her women characters are confident, educated, and rebellious. Her characters strongly believe in the ideology of ‘womanism’, a product of African traditional perspective. Further it helps to understand the cause and effect of socio-political and cultural events in post-colonial African setting, including traditional, values, intra-gender conflict and African Diaspora. The present paper critically analyses the rebellious portrayal of African Igbo women in post-colonial Nigeria, especially the paper explores the rebellious and strong women characters through the light of socio-political, economic and cultural upheavals.

In particular, the paper would analyze women characters from selected plays, *What Mama Said* (2003), *Then She Said it* (2002), and *The Missing Face* (2002) and extensively explores from cultural studies, gender narratives and post –colonial theory. To analyze the plays, the paper adopted qualitative method, including narrative and descriptive approach, which would enable to study, interpret and analyze the given characters in terms of sexual assault, norms discrimination, and culture. Tess Onwueme’s plays, help to understand the cause and the effects of socio-political and cultural events in post-colonial Africa including African Diaspora, Intra-gender conflict, clashes of modern and traditional values, unemployment, women’s subjugation, oil politics etc., and its major adverse impact on women and their reaction. The African politics witnessed major upheaval since 1970’as they had many military dictators and later the ill effects of civil war lead to violation of human rights. Many women were killed, raped, and burnt alive, forced into prostitution, trafficked

as a sex object etc. These entire events are depicted through Tess Onwueme's women characters.

### **What Mama Said (2003)**

In her newest play, *What Mama Said (2003)*, Onwueme focuses on the effect of national and global oil politics in the lives of women, youth, and impoverished rural Nigerians. Although, gender discourse both women and men, but women always have occupied fewer privileged positions in any society, which portrays that gender discourse is all about women. This injustice must be corrected for the overall benefit of society.

Perhaps this made Onwueme to choose vocal, articulate, and heroic females to populate her plays. In this play, Nigerian situations are used as a nucleus and attains global dimensions of the issues and prospects of all oppressed people. Even though the southern Nigerian arena is endowed with extensive deposits of petroleum, there is a prevalence of poverty and famine due to exhaust usage of a resource from other regions. This paradox underlies the peculiar survival modes of women during Niger-Delta reign of Nigeria and also portrays how they suffer from various health problems.

In '*What Mama Said*' Onwueme has depicted the character called Oshimi who decided to fight against exploitative leaders and the foreigners to demand justice. This play is a scathing critique of the oppressive, exploitative, multinational companies' trends as well as corrupted government officials, which devastated imaginary Suffer land's socio-economic system.

Oshimi says

*"My siblings from many shores. Today I speak to you... What is happening to our... world....Our land"*

Onwueme has presented that women have moved into the public arena, in order to tackle the forces of repression, exploitation and disempowerment rather than confining in their domestic arena of the kitchen. In her play, mother (Oshimi) tells her daughter (Omi) to rise up and correct the wrongs that filled in their societies.

Omi says

*"So again what did Mama say?' She said "Mothers,Sisters, Get ready! Ready! Ready! (Onwueme2003:141)"*

In this phrase she meant that other women 'do not sit still', and they also should get involved in employing innovative and alternative strategies as well as non-confrontational strategies to avoid blood-shed.

So Omi says

*"Mothers and sisters, you are not going to fight men with guns and bullets, with your bare hands and twigs? No mothers and sisters. We cannot. Must not play their bloody game. For that is what they are. Bloody! (p. 142)*

From the above context, it is evident that women must be mobilized in such a way that mothers must be able to teach revolutionary techniques to their daughters (the young generation of women).

The summary of this unfolding drama carries the message 'if our mothers could not rise up to fight injustice and subjugation due to ignorance, today's educated women must confront the evils that society renders towards women through knowledge and wisdom'. In today's world, women must be able to assemble all categories of women, whether young or old, rural or urban, educated or non-educated in order to fight against social ills like bad governance, corruption, nepotism, exploitation, etc.

### **Then she said it (2002)**

This play foregrounds the female characterization, as the playwright expresses her concern for the sustenance of the family and the collaboration of the sexes to combat issues of oppression and bad leadership in Nigeria and the entire developing world. 'Hiding' under the umbrella of the feminist discourse, Onwueme exposes the ills of the local and international politics of oil exploration in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The concern for women is obvious that they turn to be the ultimate victims, losing husbands and children, suffering rape along with their daughters, in the fictional nation of Hungeria. These women joined together to become the voice of the oppressed seeking full compensation in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria (Methuselah, n.d).

The play opens in an atmosphere of frenzy and chaos. The militia are on the rampage, killing and maiming people in a commando style reminiscent of the brutish and repressive attitude of many African leaders who will rather roll out tanks against poor defenseless people instead of rolling out development plans for their betterment. Consequently, they run for cover; cowering in fear and confusion. In the consequent fight, many of them were killed, raped or brutalized one way or the other. Unemployment reached tragic proportions in Hungeria, and young educated people were frustrated and started questioning regarding the usefulness of education and the certification it provides.

Due to unemployment, many young girls are pushed into vices such as prostitution in order to keep body and soul together. The play has characterized the victims named Koko, Obida and Oshun who were forced to go into prostitution and engage in other menial acts. Even though Koko got admission from the Director of Undergraduate, she was unable to continue her education due to the non-refundable deposit fee of 10,000.00 Naija cash. This call made the three friends to start the protest in order to call world attention.

*Oshun (Seriously):*

*Look, my friend. I've told you the best way for us to deal with this (sic) people is to do something.*

*Something shocking. Terrible ... Obida: Yes, mothers. We must stand up for our ...*

From the above context of *'Then She Said It'*, it is evident that it was the start for the resistance; agitation and protest continue unabated and challenge the injustice, by taking a bold move of kidnapping the oil director.

In *'Then She Said It'*, Onwueme consciously set out to reverse the roles of women. Like most of her other plays, she engenders women with power, imbuing them with the paraphernalia of authority to participate in shaping their society and not just peep from the rear as in the case elsewhere. She suggests that women should not be constructed as such weak, pliable creatures incapable of a will of their own. The heroic feat and daring spirit of Oshun, Obida, Koko and other women in the play exemplify the spirit of courage. In the end, the bold act of kidnapping the oil director shows the social consciousness of women who creates effective sensitization and conscientization.

### **The Missing Face (2002)**

Tess Onwueme's *The Missing Face* was written based on the cultural conflict that prevailed between the African communities. In this meticulously paced play, Ida had concern towards her family and culture which in turn made in search of her son's father Momah (*The Missing Face*, 2002)"

The play *'The Missing Face'* dramatizes the journey of a mother named, Ida Bee and her son Amaechi, from Milwaukee in USA to the African kingdom of Idu, a place where *'(they) can be whole...a place that can fill the emptiness with kinship and the spirit of (our) ancestors''(3)*. Ida bee had a weak economic support because she is a single parent in Milwaukee, moreover Ida feared that absence of father may affect the child's behavior as the other black children in her neighbourhood who ended being criminals, unemployed, ultimately landing in jail due to broken families. She feared more when she came to know that her son carried a gun to school. Ida believes that her son Amaechi will know about family and manhood once he is united with his father Momah in Africa:

*"When we find your father, he's gonna teach you what a real man is all about '(6)*. When Ida reached Africa, she and her son Amaechi happened to meet Odozi (uncle) and Nebe (Aunty) of Momah. Both were surprised after hearing Ida's story. At this stage, this shows the courage of Ida who came alone in search of her husband. Odozi, observes that there was facial similarity between Amaechi and Momah and feared that Momah was running away from his responsibility of being a father *'Does the snail run away from its own shell?..'*

Further Odozi angrily asks Nebe to warn Momah *'to count his teeth'*, be a man enough *'to perceive the smell of his own mouth'* and pre assuming he is the culprit. Everyone knows Momah's *'mouth smells foul'*. Ida boldly tells in the assembly how she met Momah in America. In brief, Momah believes in order to bring modernization in Africa, one needs to get rid of the useless ancestral past and become the new race of civilized people. In this play, Nebe and Ida are considered to be the most important characters; Nebe considers Ida as a daughter and also feels sorry for Ida bee's situation. Momah accepts that it is the time to correct his mistakes, realizes the injustice caused to Ida and wants to take responsibility for his action. This play proved Ida's courageous acts, which dare to challenge Momah without expecting any

help from Momah. However, she wants Momah to take responsibility of teaching their son Ameachi 'the value of African manhood'. This play of Onwueme, emphasizes the importance of family and adverse effect when the child grows without a father. The play also highlights the acts of two courageous women who are depicted through the character Ida, who searched for Husband alone and Momah's aunt (Nebe) who helped Ida in regaining her respect.

### **Conclusion**

These three tales of Osonye Tess Onwueme proved that she is a feminist, not shy about telling that women are courageous, and they have the equal responsibility to do everything in the world. Women can do everything in the world for liberation, and they have the ability to face all the problems. She has done her first tale, '*What Mama Said (2003)*' to pass the message in today's competitive and technological world that women must develop courageousness to face the corruption, exploitation, bad governance and nepotism etc. They should develop their ability to fight against injustice.

In this essay the second tale of Onwueme '*Then she said it (2002)*' deliberately argued that the women must always show social consciousness in all places.

In her third tale, '*The Missing Face (2002)*' described about the women's family importance and their adverse effect during the child growths without a father. These explored the cultural studies, gender narratives and post-colonial theory of Onwueme.

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