

**FEMALE PROTEST IN NIGERIAN DRAMATURGY: A STUDY OF IRENE SALAMI-
AGUNLOYE'S *THE QUEEN SISTERS* AND *MORE THAN DANCING***

Akporherhe Friday

Department of Languages (English Unit),
University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3910-9989>

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Udi Peter Oghenerioborue

Department of Languages, (English Unit),
University of Delta, Agbor, Nigeria

Abstract

Protest as a concept in gender discourse is not a recent phenomenon in Nigeria because some existing cultural and political structures have undisputedly created an unbearable gap between the male and the female gender that has resulted in series of agitations and protest by the female. This paper aims at using Salami-Agunloye's plays, *The Queen Sisters* and *More Than Dancing*, to examine the walls of cultural and political inhibitions that negate the rights and freedom of women. The literary texts were purposively selected due to their thematic relevance and materials that are relevant to the topic were consulted and employed to substantiate arguments in the textual analysis. The feminist theory was adopted since the study examines female protest in Nigerian dramaturgy in Irene Salami-Agunloye's *The Queen Sisters* and *More Than Dancing*. The chosen plays present Nigerian women's resistance to all forms of continuous cultural imposition, suppression, subjugation and protest against the political structure. The findings reveal that female protests in both cultural and political settings are justified and call on the male gender to embrace and work towards attitudinal change of seeing and accepting the female gender as partners in progress rather than engage in a war of sexes.

Keywords: protest, dramaturgy, women, gender, equality.

Introduction

An extensive study of world literature confirms the universal experience that a struggle is intellectually, economically and politically uplifting for those who engage in it and that not much is ever achieved without it. The African woman's struggle for emancipation has been defined through different terminologies. Zulu Sofola called it "dewomanisation" of womanhood while Nnolim (1994) referred to it as "Shadowboxing". Whatever the necessity for the proliferation of terms, the crucial thing is that the Nigerian woman, just as her counterparts in other parts of Africa has come to recognize her disadvantaged position in society and often demonstrate her opposition to it individually and collectively, with various levels of success depending on the intensity of her protest. This struggle took on global dimension with women's

education and the empowerment that intellectual development bestows on individual. The women carry out the fight on all fronts; culturally, politically, religiously, socially, economically, educationally and so on.

Protest themes feature prominently in the works of dramatists like Wole Soyinka, Kole Omotoso, John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo and Femi Osofisan, to mention a few. The last few decades in Nigeria witnessed the emergence of drama written by African female dramatists and some patronising male dramatists whose plays protest the customary relegation of the African woman to the background in the patriarchal traditional society of Africa where generally the voice of the women is heard but she is never seen; a fact reflected by early novels of Chinua Achebe, Soyinka, Elechi Amadi and other male writers (Agho, 2011). The late arrival of female writers to

the African literary scene, according to Agho, generally favoured the perpetuation of this relegation, which is countered in the works of African female writers using the parameters of feminism. It has therefore been noted that drama under this tradition of writing highlights the plight of women in the hands of men. As expected, the body of works produced under this tradition of writing in the words of Agho (2011:20) “internalises within their constitution a rhetorical vehemence defined by protest.” In view of the foregoing, the current study intends to examine Salami-Agunloye’s *The Queen Sisters* and *More Than Dancing* to correct the gender inequality and social injustices in contemporary society.

One of the most outstanding literary phenomena of the past four decades in Africa and particularly in Nigeria is the emergence of female writers across the genres of literature. It all began in 1966 with Flora Nwapa, the first Nigerian female to have her work published in London. Her first novel, *Efuru* redefines the place of woman and sets the tone not only for her subsequent works, but for those of other feminist writers. Drawing inspiration from Flora Nwapa, modern Nigerian playwrights including Irene Salami-Agunloye present women struggles, protests and resistance from various forms of oppressive cultural practice. In an attempt to situate herself in the male dominated literary space, Salami-Agunloye has resolved to re-writing negative stereotypical portrayal of women in texts written by men. In doing this, she constructs new identities for female characters or heroines whom she uses as her mouth-piece to buttress her view points and engage in a criticism of the society. As Chukwukere (1995) puts it, “the role of the African female writers is to dramatise injustices against women and thereby attracts society’s attention to them.” The demand for the liberation of women can therefore be seen as a fundamental revolutionary act by a gender group that has been at the receiving end of all that is unjust, unfair, and unacceptable. Women have been dominated by the male folk for ages using the instruments of culture, tradition and religion to perpetuate the injustice. The core message is that women can and should look inward for their emancipation because if the oppressed refused to cry out, the oppressors will

glory in their oppression.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to contextualise protest in Nigeria female dramaturgy by examining the contradictions between male and female views as portrayed in Irene Salami-Agunloye’s *The Queen Sisters* and *More Than Dancing*. It examines how customs and traditional practices have affected the lives of girls and women adversely in Nigeria and addresses those harmful cultural and political practices that tend to disempower women. It interrogates these harmful practices and wonders whether they should be considered as crimes or as realities that the women should learn to live with; to explore the mind-set of Nigerians towards women’s protest for the redefinition of gender relationships and the agitations for social equity and fair play; and to find ways of giving new lease of life to the culturally and politically deprived Nigerian women.

Literature Review

Drama is a vital medium for articulating and interpreting the realities and aspirations of society. It is used to portray and interpret the historical, sociological, political, economic and cultural issues of the day. Thus playwrights do not operate in a vacuum but mirrors the needs of his/her society in his/her works. In the light of contemporary realities, Nigerian playwrights employ protest drama as a medium of expressing the struggles and aspirations of the oppressed masses in society. Based on the foregoing, studies on protest in Nigerian female drama abound, however, this work will focus on female protest in dramaturgy of Irene Salami-Agunloye’s *The Queen Sisters* and *More Than Dancing*. For instance, Sesan (2018) explores the history of wars in Yoruba nationalities, revealing different experiences and challenges faced by women in times of wars as portrayed in Femi Osofisan’s *Morountuodun* and *Women of Owu*. In the former, the author presents women as heroines and anti-heroines while in the latter, women are depicted as victims and vallians. The study of Affiah (2012) focuses on protest, resistance and activism in the drama of Osonye Tess Onwueme. He examines *Then She Said It* and found that the text “advocates adequate conscientization and sensitization of the people since peoples’ protest, revolt and uprising

seems to be the only means of effecting change and establishing a society where justice, fairplay and equitable sharing of the commonwealth will prevail” (284). In corroborating the above findings, Affiah acknowledges Uko (2004:164) who affirms “protest as the dominant strategy for survival adopted by the women in *Then She Said It*.” These studies will definitely enrich the current work as they focus on protest in dramaturgy especially in African settings.

The study by Binebai (2013) will also add value to this research since it focuses on protest premise in drama and theatre of Africa as a spotlight on cultural nationalism. In the paper, the scholar investigated how African drama within the context and content “underscores correction, negotiation, elimination of bottlenecks and unhealthy cultures, anti-cultural activities, of anger against bad leadership, among others.” Moreso, Afolayan and Adeseke’s (2012) research explores the aesthetics of alienation in modern Nigerian drama as depicted in Olu Obafemi’s *Suicide Syndrome*, however, attention is also shifted to “protest against the corruption, sycophancy and thoughtless exhibition of wealth by the bourgeois class.” The findings of the research carried out by Selvam (2017) reveal theatre as a tool for social protest with reference to the plays of August Wilson. It attempts to portray the supplications of the African Americans through the voices of August Wilson, a significant playwright who utilized theatre as a tool and recorded their sufferings. Similarly, Ajidahun (2016:97) focuses on revolutionary aesthetics of the plays and dramaturgical essences of Femi Osofisan, he explores a thematic study of Osofisan’s *The Chattering and the Song* and *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest*, where the playwright exposes the political leadership in Africa as characterised by dictatorship, despotism, tyranny and corruption. The texts project the playwright’s vision in arousing the revolutionary consciousness of the masses to revolt against oppression, tyranny and social injustice in the society.

In addition to the above studies, Doki’s (2006) work, *Foremothers in History: a Study of Irene-Agunloye’s plays*, examines the need to transform the negative stereotypical roles women

are made to play in text scripted by men and in society. Flowing from the above, Doofan and Alachi (2006) in “Women Empowerment and Gender Issues in Contemporary Nigerian Democratic Texts”, equally posit that women empowerment is necessary for political, economic and social development of the society. Salami-Agunloye’s *Emotan* depicts how an empowered woman can bring peace and justice to the society. Furthermore, the play enjoins women to liberate themselves from the oppression of men. Lucas (2009) in his work, *The Drama of Women Exploitation and Victimisation in Irene Salami-Agunloye’s Sweet Revenge* explores the plight of women and stresses the need to give women a chance. This subject correlates with Oyelade and Lateef’s (2009) discourse in their study, *The Taboo Motif and Gender Issues in Irene Salami-Agunloye’s in The Queen Sisters and More Than Dancing*. Here, the scholars argued that the liberation of women through protest is inevitable and cautioned that the liberation need not be revolutionary but could be evolutionary. This study argues that protest is usually uplifting for those who engage in it, and that to a considerable extent, some degree of aggression is required to achieve the objectives of protesters.

Protest Drama in Nigeria

Protest drama could be defined as the drama or theatre that is motivated by issues and policies in the society that alienate, dehumanise, exploit and suppress the masses politically, socially, economically as well as culturally (Embu, 2009). It could as well be seen as an antagonistic stance to register the playwright’s discontent with certain perceived ills in society. Protest drama in Nigeria dates back to the pre-colonial era when communality was the order of the day. Like the literature of that era, it was oral in nature and embedded in the cultural milieu of the people. It found expression in songs, dances, music and other cultural forms available to the community. This tradition of oral protest still exists in contemporary Nigeria, in villages where traces of communalism are still very vibrant with the oral artist who is seen as a repository of knowledge in the forefront. Protest drama in Nigeria is classified under Recreative Theatre. Recreative theatre, according to Obafemi (1982), is an element of revolutionary

literature. Its form, content and style are usually configured in the purview of Marxist aestheticism. It is characterised by a radical departure from the prevailing individualist dramatic plays pivoted by John Pepper Clark-Bekederemo and Wole Soyinka in Nigeria. In other words, it focuses on social commitment and historical reconstruction through class struggle. The content is agitation, protesting against the status quo with sharp and biting comments on socio-political and economic system of the country and it pursues radical transformations of the society. Recreative plays have been given various nomenclatures by renowned scholars. Obafemi (2001) calls them plays for political theatre, Gbileka (1997) refers to them as plays of the radical dramatists, and Akinwale (1993) describes them as protest plays. Whichever definition ascribed to protest drama by scholars, the fact remains that agitator employed them in revolutionizing socio-economic and political imbalance and enthrone societal transformation.

Female Protest in Nigeria

Female's involvement in social protest has been an age-long tradition. Many women have used the threat or actual act of nakedness as a form of effective political protest for centuries. In Nigeria, for instance, most people believe that their mother's bodies should be revered. As such, it is a taboo for a woman, particularly an old woman, to choose to go naked in reaction to any situation. In the 1930's, members and supporters of the Abeokuta Women's Union walked naked in protest against the Alake of Abeokuta's political actions and forced him into exile. This same peaceful method of protest (nudity) was used by the women of Ado Ekiti State of Nigeria, to protest against the evil of electoral malpractice perpetuated in the rerun election in their Local Government in 2007. The Aba women revolt of 1929 which was a protest against the unjust imposition of taxes by the colonial authority is a historical fact of women's collective action against oppression. Thus, the argument that women naturally are apolitical is indeed not true as women in the past and in contemporary times have been seen and know to react to perceived oppression. As Salami-Agunloye (2006) established;

...our foremothers were known to

have accomplished great things; displayed exceptional skill and talent; stood up against oppression, injustice and contributed much to the society. They had difficult challenges which they surmounted and were still able to participate. In this regard, we remember the likes of Emotan of Benin, Queen Idia, and Queen Ubi, among others (99).

Similarly, Margaret Ekpo, Gambo Sawaba, Queen Amina, Queen Moremi and Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, to mention a few, were very active politically. The great exploits of these heroines are not only documented in literary works for successive generations to study and appreciate but also dramatized in schools with a view to re-enacting their character-traits and achievements in traditional African societies.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the feminist theory since the aim is to examine female protest in Nigerian dramaturgy in Irene Salami-Agunloye's *The Queen Sisters* and *More Than Dancing*. The word feminism is derived from the Latin femina which means all things that are related to woman (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). It cuts across various academic disciplines and so it could be applied to foreground scholarly works. Several definitions of feminism abound and a few of these shall be examined in relation to the aim and objectives of this study. According to Oriaku (2012:130), "Feminism refers to an attitude as well as a movement both of which are informed by a notion of male dominance of society and a concomitant marginalisation of women." In corroborating the above submission, the scholar posits that:

Whereas Marxist schemas identify oppressors and the oppressed, the privileged and the underprivileged, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, master and servant, the victimiser and the victim, etc., the feminists adopt these categories and ascribe to the male segment of society the unenviable classifications of oppressors, privileged, bourgeoisie, master and victimiser; the woman is the underprivileged and disadvantage

person, the victim of perennial social injustice” (131).

The above statement thus reveals that feminism is a struggle for equity and justice for both males and females irrespective of their socio-economic, cultural and political background in society. In the view of Lorber (1998), feminism is a social movement whose goal is raising the status of women while Quayson (2007) found that the concept is about challenging the representations of women and arguing for better conditions for them. In a similar vein, The New Encyclopaedia Britannica (1990:735) states that Feminist movement sought to change society's prevailing stereotypes of women as relatively weak, passive and dependent individuals who are less rational and more emotional than men...to achieve greater freedom for women to work and remain economically and psychologically independent of men if they chose. From the above, it is obvious that feminism is a movement that supports equal opportunities for men and women and asserts that women are entitled to the same political, economic, social and intellectual rights as men. In this study, attention shall be on exploration of women's struggle against domination by men and their efforts towards liberation and self-assertion. The study is library-based and so the literary texts were purposively selected due to their thematic relevance to the current research and they are Irene Salami-Agunloye's *The Queen Sisters* and *More Than Dancing*. Also, secondary materials that are relevant to the subject matter were also consulted and employed to corroborate arguments and discussions in the textual analysis. The primary texts were analysed through descriptive and analytic methods.

Protest in Irene Salami-Agunloye's Selected Plays

The discussion on the restricted place and position of women in the scheme of human affairs in Nigeria dates back to pre-colonial era and it has not fully been erased even with today's post-colonial reality. Iorapuu (2006) writes that: “The political happenings and manipulations of women between 1999 and 2003 infuriated many women of the political class. Strong female civil activists that ventured into politics were methodically played out of the race”(110). Even the involvement of

women into politics appears not to make any significant impact in the lives of women and children in Nigerian. Besides, the female political actors also face some challenges hence Iorapuu submits that “Those that were successfully elected and held very high positions were impeached. Several instances abound where women were shamefully diminished out of politics” (110). In the light of the above, Irene Salami-Agunloye's *The Queen Sisters* and *More Than Dancing* are, therefore, plays that extend this long line of historical restrictions and protest of women in Nigeria. With critical study of these plays, it can be asserted that for the playwright, “looking back is looking forward; the visionary artist is not only a remember, he/she is also a reminder” (Osundare, 1986). It is worthy of note that literature, through its genres, serves diverse purposes which include fundamentally changing the human society for the better. Of particular interest in this study is Salami-Agunloye's favourable disposition in turning the seemingly slavish and docile position imposed on women through a series of protest to that of the appreciated, liberated and accepted political leaders. At this juncture, we shall examine the concept of protest as depicted in Salami-Agunloye's two selected plays.

Protest in *The Queen Sisters*

The Queen Sisters tells the story of two sisters Ubi and Ewere. Against her wish Ubi is forcefully in obedience to an established tradition, married off to Oba Ewuare of Benin despite her protest and resistance. Omoze, Ubi's mother belongs to the old generation of docile women who believes that they need not bother themselves with things they have no power to change. In her words, “Our mothers endured it, so why can't we?” (23). Omoze's disposition is further collaborated in the description of the age-long African woman by Chief Oliha:

The entire life of a woman is centred on us anyway. When she fights her mate, it is because of a man. When she weeps it is because she desires the attention of a man, when she dresses it is because she wants to attract or please a man. When she laughs, it is because a man made her happy. When she trades, it is to assist a man. When she marries, her name

changes to that of a man. What else?
They have no life of their own. Their
lives rotate around us (26).

In contrast to Ewere, Ubi the protagonist who is an ardent opposite of the old generation believes and preaches mutual respect, freedom, dialogue, compatibility and genuine love in terms of marriage and rejects imposition in all its form and shade. Omoze attempts to let Ubi see reasons with her father by accepting to marry the Oba but Ubi says: “Mother, why do you want to force me to marry someone against my wish? Do you know what you are asking me to do? To marry the Oba and become one of his numerous wives hidden away in his harem? No mother, I won’t succumb to that” (22-23). Ubi is presented as a strong character and the voice of the oppressed woman in society who is not ready to be cowed or placed under any restrictions. Her will power gives our women the hope for the future. Her protest is unequivocal and to the point and she says: “You want to hide me away in the palace where I will be placed under several restrictions. I won’t shut up, mother. I will protest so that everybody will hear me” (22). She does not stop there but reiterates her vision of the kind of marital life she would like to live. Ubi asserts:

When I marry, it will be to a man I love,
and who will love me equally. A man who
will stand by me through thick and thin. A
man who will share my thoughts, and I,
his. A man who will always be there for
me. A man I can have unrestricted access
to at anytime. A man I can call my own,
not having to share him with anyone (23).

To further buttress her stand, Ubi tries to let her mother (Omoze) realise that she (Ubi) is no longer a child and that her protest and aspirations are achievable when she says: “Mother,... Am I a child? I am talking about what you and I can do if we agree on what we want. Nothing is permanent in this world. Everything is subjected to change no matter how long the practice has been”(23). While emphasizing her idea of marriage in society, she clearly states that “Marriage is a relationship between two people who are in love. Not between strangers; not between numerous people either. I will not become a fish amongst other fish in the ocean because I want to marry a king. No mother,

that is not my idea of marriage” (23). Having being compelled by tradition to marry the Oba, Ubi becomes restive and aggressive. She is rude, bold and arrogant. Her co-wives and Benin chiefs find this very irksome and disturbing, and the only way to put Ubi’s purported insolence and arrogance in check is to bring her half-sister (Ewere) to join her in the harem as co-wife. According to Osuma, “Ubi needs to be tamed. She has the heart of a devil. She neither fears nor respects anyone, not even the Oba...The medicine for any insolent wife is a new bride who is like her. Remember, when the sun refuses to be admired, you admire her sister the moon” (45). But Ewere’s docility, kindness and humility sharply contrast Ubi’s misperceived insolence and arrogance. Courteous and respectful, Ewere becomes popular and well-loved by all. Her unhappy sister (Ubi) who refused to submit and to be cowed by what she considers unprogressive traditions and customs, plots to kill the Oba. The attempt fails and Ubi is later chased out of the harem for “bedwetting” which is an abominable offence in the Kingdom.

In presenting us with two contrasting characters, Salami-Agunloye raises two fundamental issues that are common in human life; good, and evil’; docility and aggression. In the first place, Ubi may appear mean and evil because of her helpless situation, but she has another side that is worthy of emulation. She is aggressive when it comes to fighting for her rights, outspoken and candid. In this regard, she is a major mouthpiece of today’s woman.

The playwright presents Ubi as a woman who wants to wave her banner of freedom. Her aggressiveness, therefore should not be misconstrued to mean evil. In fact, one can postulate that these two sisters invariably represent two brand of feminism; the radical and the accommodationist. The intention of Salami-Agunloye in portraying Ewere as being docile, calm and respectful, while Ubi is fearless, self-willed and bold is that she wants to teach profound lessons about feminism. The playwright paints her picture as a character that resists women as appendages, sex-tools, and marital slaves who are dependent factories for producing children and expanding the territory of men specifically the Oba. Though she appears as women liberator, most

people including her cowives and some chiefs misconstrue her mission. For instance, in order to frustrate her effort, Enahen, the head of Oba's wives mobilized the other women in the palace against Ubi. They vowed to rather remain in the palace as custom demands than regain freedom and live a life of self-determination and fulfilment outside the Oba's Palace.

In juxtaposing Ewere and Ubi, the contemporary Nigerian woman is expected to learn from them. However, to bring about the desired change, we must consider deeply our earlier statement in the introductory part of this paper that "if the oppressed refused to cry out, the oppressor will glory in their oppression". Ubi's position in this play is therefore meant to draw attention to the fact that it is not yet uhuru and to serve as a form of inspiration to the woman in quest for cultural emancipation. In most societies, women are still being treated as commodities especially when it relates to marriage. For instance, in the play Chief Uwangué delivers the message of the Oba to Ogieka, thus; "Omo has sent us to express his interest in your eldest daughter, Ubi. We are here to ask what day we should expect her in the palace"(17). However, Ogieka sees this request as an honour bestow on him by the Oba without seeking the consent of the his daughter, Ubi over the marriage proposal: "Take it step-by-step, Chief Uwangué. Oba Ewuare is asking my daughter's hand in marriage? What have I done to deserve this great honour? Wait a minute my honourable chiefs, did he say specifically that is Ubi he wants?" (17) Ogieka responds further that; "Thank you, my chiefs: I have heard the Oba's message. I accept his kind royal gesture. I will send Ubi to the Oba's palace in two market weeks' time. However, I would have wished the Oba had asked my opinion before making his choice"(18). Ogieka is portrayed as a character who struggles to preserve the old tradition by granting the request of the Oba even though it is against the wish of his daughter. He also sees reason Ubi's protest against the cultural practice of marrying off a woman without her consent.

Salami-Agunloye presents a culture that violates the fundamental rights of women without being sensitive to their emotional feelings. Ubi addresses her own father, thus; "Father, remember

you have many daughters. I only happen to be the first. If the Oba has promised you anything and you want to trade me, in return, you have got it all wrong this time. I am going nowhere. I will marry only when and to whom I like" (p.19). In the past, marriages in traditional settings are arranged by both parents before their daughters are informed. This is the position of Ubi's mother, Omoze in the play but she declines to her mother's scolding: "Go to my room? Mother, I will go nowhere. I am not moving an inch. This matter concerns me. I am the one you are discussing, remember? It is neither you nor father. So I must stay to see the end of this matter"(19). Ogieka insists that Ubi must relocate to the Oba's palace without further delay in order not to disobey him. He threatens Omoze that "if in two weeks time Ubi is not ready to go to the palace, you will pack your load and leave my home with your strong-headed daughter. Is that clear?" in furtherance of his submission, he states that "if I had my way Ubi will not go to the palace. The Oba has made his choice and I cannot change it"(p.20). Ogieka's utterances affirm the powerful nature of the Oba whose words are law for all subjects must obey across the Kingdom.

The infringement on women's right to marriage is demonstrated by Oba Ewuare earlier in the play by giving Chief Iyase his eldest daughter, Ubi Edeleyo in marriage as his sincere appreciation for Iyase's support. The Oba declares thus;

My daughter Edeleyo, from this day,
Chief Iyase has become your husband.
The pigeon never marries two husbands.
So, Chief Iyase becomes your partner for
life. Go, my daughter. I say, go in peace
and tranquillity; nothing will be difficult
for you in your new home, for the knife
never finds the okra difficult to cut"(5)

Unlike Ubi who represents women voices in modern society, she accepts the arranged marriage without questioning her father, "Father, your wish is my command and your pleasure is my reward"(5). Edeleyo is portrayed as a character who is passive, humble and submissive to customs and traditional values, seeing the Oba as someone whose words are decrees which must never be flattered by his subjects. In the play, most of the men see wives and the girl-child as their assets which

are required to earn fame and wealth. The words of Oba Ewuare while conversing with Enahen, his most senior wife in the harem affirm the foregoing: you should be happy that more women are coming under your fold and that the Oba's harem is expanding. More children, more wives and more fame. That is enough reason to make you jubilate. The more you are, the happier you should be" (14). The king also informs Enahen the traditional roles of women in most African traditional societies especially in Benin Kingdom and these include; "Looking after your children, teaching your children about our customs and traditions, royal court etiquettes and so on. Teaching them how to be good wives. That's enough to keep you busy. Now you go and talk to the women to make good use of their time" (p.16). The playwright through the play has demonstrated that women are appendages to men and they are only needed because of the children they procreate. Oba Ewuare affirms this by saying that;

As my kingdom expands so will my harem expand too. No intrigues in the harem will stop me. Whistling is not a difficult task in the mouth of the parrot. After all the wealth of a man is measured by the number of wives, children and men around him. Omo e egie. Omo e ede, omo u 'wa, omo se igho. A man's children are his assurance of a greater tomorrow. His wives provide these children. That is their use"(16).

Again, Ezomo and Oliha discuss the role or value of women in society. In the words of the former; "What is there to fear about any woman? What resources do they have to compete with men? However, we will continue to go for them, not because they are good but because we need them. If pounded yam is not eaten for its own sake, it is eaten because of the soup"(29). The foregoing statements reveal that men consider the womenfolk for the support they render in families. In the play, Ubi tries to educate Omoze about what marriage entails in modern society and protests over sharing the Oba with other wives. She reacts to Ivie who accuses her of hijacking the Oba's bedchamber since she arrived the palace; "You have not left Omo's bedchamber since you arrived and now you think you can look down on all of us?

Do you think we care whether you mix with us or not?" (31). In a swift response to Ivie's observation, Ubi declares her mission to Oba's palace;

So is that what is hurting you all? Is it because I allow you to enjoy Omo's warmth occasionally? From now on, you are all forbidden from his bedchamber until I say so. Is that clear? I did not come to the harem for idle talks like you. When I made up my mind to come to the harem, it was for a purpose. I came here to fulfil a mission. To bring about a drastic change in the harem (32).

The old wives of the Oba see no reason in aligning with Ubi to achieve the desired changes, instead, they threaten to quit their marriage as a protest against Ubi's unruly behaviours; domineering and self-centred within the Oba's palace. Enahen who is the eldest wife of the Oba complains about Ubi's disrespectful attitude towards her cowives; "Look here, my child, if your mother didn't tell you that you are married to the Omo n' Oba N'Edo Uku Akpolokpolo, Ewuare Ogidigan, you better go back home and let her brief you properly. In the harem there is a hierarchy. You are the least for now. I am Enahem, the Iye Erie; every wife is subject to my authority" (32). In every socio-cultural setting, the actions of certain people can hinder positive changes that can transform the lives of citizens. Salami presents Enahem as a feminine character that acts against women liberation. She scolds Ubi who wants to change the customs and traditions of the Benin people especially in the areas of suppression and marginalization of the womenfolk in society;

For your information, we are very satisfied with our lives here in the harem. Your mission here will fail. If you desperately want to bring about change anywhere, go and start it from your father's house. With a child like you, they need your desired change. However, as long as you are here in the harem, you must recognize the line of authority. I am Iye Erie and head of you all (32).

The ploy to checkmate Ubi in the palace was introduced by Osuma who suggests that getting the

Oba “a bride that will match Ubi” in the kingdom of Benin and so Ewere is recommended since “the same (blood) runs in their veins” (46). This actually aggravates the problems in the palace of the Oba. In the dramatic text, Ubi is boastful, determined and visionary. She demands to control a part of Benin Kingdom which the Oba and his chiefs see as an aberration.

A major strategy adopted by Ubi to demonstrate her protest is by refusing to get pregnant for the Oba. In the play, when Enahen calls for patience in the palace, Evbu responds thus; “The other time you said, be patient she will soon be pregnant” she then refused to become pregnant. You later said they were bringing someone who would become her tormentor, see what is happening. The tormentor has become the tormented”(65). Salami’s play has provided insight into modern society that some men also share in the burdens and visions of women as evident in the play. For instance, some of the chiefs like Ehizogie and Utete advise Ubi to act fast before the Oba carries out his actions against her.

Protest in *More Than Dancing*

Salami-Agunloye’s *More Than Dancing* also deals with the ideology of protest and revolt. It portrays a society that is culturally and politically structured with the males playing dominant roles while women are perceived and treated as appendages to their male counterparts. The play begins with Madam Bisi, leader of the women wing of the United People’s Liberation Party challenging the tradition of seeing women merely as dancers at political rallies and party functions while the men occupy every position of relevance in the party hierarchy. She stops the dancing and drumming and reminds the women of their rights to participate actively in politics alongside the men, instead of playing second fiddle to the men all the time. She puts it bluntly:

Stop the drumming! Stop dancing!! Stop immediately. Stop I say!!! Enough of the dancing! Enough is enough!! Year in, Year in, year out, primaries come and party elections go, all we do is dance. Is dancing all we can do? Is that all we are meant for? ... Look at the high table (points at the top row where the dignitaries are seated). How many

women do you see up there? ... For heaven’s sake, women, this is not the time to dance. Stop dancing. Go back to your homes. Think about your future. Think about the future of your daughters. For how long must we be denied our constitutional rights? ... We must wake up from our complacency. No more dancing (1-2).

However, Bisi does not find this challenge easy as the men are up to the game, having been there for ages. Sani retorts; “You are not ripe enough to lead. Your time has not come. Wait for your time. Don’t jump the gun”(3). Sharing the same view as the above, but displaying more of the male dominance syndrome, Madu says; “You see, all women are good for is dance at party rallies, not to rule! They have no place in politics! Not in Africa politics or decision-making process! We will fight them with our last drop of blood!” (30). The traditional and colonial hard stance of Sani and Madu as seen above, reveals a high degree of unimaginable discrimination against women seeking leadership posts all over Nigeria. Most positions within political parties are often distributed among men while the women are relegated to the background leaving them with the position of women leaders. Bisi expresses her utmost disappointment over the marginalization of the women in the party:

United People’s Liberation Party is a party for men, dominated by men, safeguarded by men. Men are chairpersons, secretaries, vice chairpersons, treasurers, public relations officers, welfare officers, financial secretaries, publicity secretaries and so on. They are members of the board of trustees. Then, we are remembered as women leaders (2).

Even when the best candidate eventually turns out to be a woman as in the case of Prof. Nona, she is often side-tracked on the basis of gender and this of course accounts for the female protest and challenging of the status quo. Madam Bisi’s statement corroborate the foregoing, thus “We are supposed to be a United People’s Liberation Party; the liberation is for only men, not for women. Yet when it is time for election, women are mobilized

to vote. We are only good for dancing and voting”(2). In Nigeria, the oppression and intimidation of women over the years appears to be a cultural phenomenon for which many are guilty. Uchendu (1993) boldly states that: “Men cannot claim exclusive right to shape the future of our world. It is time for them to accept challenge and share with women in decision-making process”(64). This assertion is not out of place because it takes collective effort of every citizen to develop society. It against this background that the above scholar concludes that “It is high time to acknowledge that the denial of women’s right and opportunities is at the root of our developmental problems and social economic ills... The most underdeveloped of all human resources are women” (Uchendu (1993: 64).

The conflict between the women and the men in *More Than Dancing* is, therefore, a deliberate designed by Salami-Agunloye to check the male domination and the relegation of women in politics. Through the character of Madam Bisi, the playwright declares the equal political rights for both men and women in every democratic government. Bisi while addressing the women at the party’s mini-convention affirms without mincing words thus; “You must realize that it is your fundamental human right to participate in governance. This is a democratic dispensation. Democracy is for all. It is for women as much as it is for men. Women are equal partners with men in governance”(2). She is able to sustain the protest with an analogy of Nigerian female legends. These legends are brought into the play to spur the women in the spirit of comradeship. Prof. Nona who is the icon of the Nigerian woman picks up the challenge as she is conscientiously nominated by the women to pick a flag for the presidential election. Nona claims to be a novice in politics and adds that she loves her home and career and so almost opts to withdraw from the race but for the remembrance of the vision of the past Nigerian female legends, who in the past distinguished themselves in order to liberate their respective societies. The beatification of the Nigerian female legends in this play is therefore a patriotic act for Nigerian women to follow and render selfless service to the nation. Prof Nona receives her signals in a vision through the magnificent

activities of these Nigerian heroines as moderated by Mama Nigeria.

The playwright through the use of past legendary female characters reminds readers particularly the womenfolk of the great women whose impacts are still being felt across the country today. They include Amina, Idia, Moremi, Inikpi, Emotani and Funmilayo, to mention a few. The sacrifices of these characters are enormous yet they never attained the highest office in their time. Nona’s dream about the legendary women’s struggles in the past affirms this; “so you mean these women had to go through all these just for our nation? Women gave up their comfort, their lives, their honour, their families and their names all for national unity, peace and stability? Yet, none has ever had the advantage of being near the highest seat. Now is the time. We will continue from where they stopped” (68).

The agitation of the women in the play triggers mixed reactions. For instance, some men are strongly in support of the women’s liberation while others are opposed to their demands. Hakeem is among such men who supports the women liberation through advice, thus; “women, my advice to you is not to end up talking but also to back up your words with actions. Let us see a demonstration of this new consciousness in practical terms”(4). In corroborating the counsel of Hakeem to the women, Femi has this to say; “you have to realize that no one party can empower anyone. You have to work hard at empowering yourselves so you can participate effectively. Voters are free to vote in whosoever they choose, male or female”(4). The playwright presents the fact that the position occupied by the women in society is socially constructed to suppress and marginalize them, hence Prof Nona while making effort to convince Ebele says;

My sister Ebele, you see, one of the reasons the plight of women has been such a difficult issue to tackle is that it’s not easy to change a man’s mind about a woman’s place in the world. The idea that this is a man’s world is very deeply entrenched in our society. Even though legislation might be passed, or public policy changed, you cannot change a man’s mindset about women (10).

In the opinion of Aisha, something must be done urgently for womenfolk to become relevant and also stop further exclusion and marginalization of women. However, Omozele sees women exploitation as universal. She says; “I see, so this internalized devaluing of women is the reason why women generally continue to be exploited in almost every society in the world, regardless of certain social and political advances” (10). However, the men see the earlier appointments given women as a threat to their collective dreams and aspirations. Sani has this to say; “You see, I warned us about nominating a wise woman like Madam Bisi as woman leader. That woman is too intelligent for us. Now, see what we are faced with; she is turning the table against us” (31). Madu’s response reveals more about the fear of men as the women agitate for equal rights and opportunities. The men regret the nomination of Madam Bisi whom they see as wise and intelligent. Apart from the educational background of the women in the party, the men are also scared of their ability to mobilize their fellow women during elections. Nevertheless, Hakeem sees the need to support women in society. According to him, “whether we like it or not, women are the custodians of the destiny of mankind. The destiny of mankind lies in the laps of women”(38). To him, the men in the political party should collaborate with the women to enable them actualize their dreams instead of antagonism;

Isn’t this debasing? “To be fighting our wives and sisters in such a dirty manner? Yet we call ourselves men, the super-power breed. Let us not stoop so low. Why are we so adamant and set in our ways? We must be realistic and move with the trend of events. If we don’t work hand in hand with the women, they will move ahead and push us out of the center of action and we will become mere spectators (74).

Apart from Hakeem, there are other male supporters who later help in various ways to ensure the successful election of the woman president in the play. However, Ejura and Minika see the struggle as over-ambitious and they express their pessimism about the radical change. Madam Bisi at this juncture tries to convince them to believe in

the struggle, saying that “as a woman, you have equal potential as men; we are the ones who must fight for our our rights. Men will not fight our battles for us. After all, we are good campaigners, organizers and support-mobilizers, yet we always shy away from elective posts” (48). The playwright presents some women who are conservative and try to avoid conflict with the men especially in the marriages. This is evident in the play where Ejura counters Madam Bisi’s view that “in every socio-political sphere in this country, women are under-represented” and so they cannot “influence national policy” to favour the womenfolk” (49). But women should understand that they must collaborate with their male counterparts to achieve their ambitions. As Madam Bisi rightly pointed out in the text; “Elective positions will not fall from the sky; we have to work to get them. We need a re-orientation. We need to develop our self-esteem and accept political challenge in whatever manner they appear. We must have confidence in our fellow women and stand by them both at meetings and at the polls”(48). So, in order to achieve their mission, they have strategized, design certain programmes that cover the men. It is against this background that Nona continues to gain maximum support from their male counterparts.

Nona sees the unity and support of the womenfolk as paramount for the attainment of their freedom. Her knowledge of the great exploits of women in time past inspires her to remain determined and committed to the struggle for women liberation and victory at the polls. She never allows the oppressive traditional structures suffocate her dreams as they did to women in the past.

One of the greatest achievements of Salami-Agunloye in *More Than Dancing* is that despite the avid resistant posture of the men and their various electoral intrigues, the women relying on the antecedents of their courageous foremothers like Inikpi of Igala, Moremi of Ife, Queen Kambassa of Bonny, Madam Tinubu of Lagos, Emotan of Benin, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, Gambo Sawaba, Queen Amina of Zazzau, and Queen Idia, to mention a few. In fact, Queen Idia had “strong influence and political power”. She was “crowned the first Iyaba of Benin

Kingdom” with her “palace at lower Uselu” (18). With the doggedness and resilience of Madam Bisi, Prof. Nona and the sympathy of a few liberated men like Hakeem and Jeta, the women were able to mobilise, raise funds and transparently elect Prof. Nona as the President of the country to the chagrin of the men.

Effects of Nigerian Customs and Traditions on Women

Having examined the subject of protest in both texts, our focus will be shifted to the effects of Nigerian customs and traditions on the lives of girls and women as portrayed by the playwright. It is not gainsaying that literary productions may be true reflections of the society where they are produced. Although the characters, events and actions are imaginative works of writers, they depict factual experiences of people in real life. Africa particularly Nigerian cultures and traditions are pro-patriarchy and so female characters are marginalized, suppressed and exploited economically, politically, religiously and culturally. In Irene Salami-Agunloye’s *The Queen Sisters*, Hakeem declares that; “Patriarchy, subordination of women and the deep-rooted belief that public affairs are reserved for men and that social contract is about the relationship between men and government and not citizens, come together to exclude women notwithstanding constitutional rights and democracy”(36). Also, Madu is vehemently against women being elected or included into “the decision-making process” as stated earlier but prefers assigning entertainment roles to them in society: “The village arena is set for anyone who is skilled in taking dance steps. Let them get here if they want to dance”(36). Like maidens in most socio-cultural settings, women are known for creative dance as means of entertainment usually at coronations, chieftaincy confirmations, marriages, funeral rites, visits of dignitaries, and so on. In politics, girls and women are also mobilized for dance performances. Dance has certainly been an important part of ceremony, rituals, celebrations and entertainment since before the birth of the earliest human civilization (Martinec, 2013:144).

African cultures restrain women from participating in various socio-political activities that will bring them to the limelight in society. For

instance, the playwright through her text, presents the subordination of women to their husbands based on custom and traditions. In the play, Uyi Odaro reminds his wife, Prof. Unona Odaro who aspires to become president, thus: “Every woman under a man does only what her husband tells her to do. It is believed that women cannot take decisions without due consultations with their partners. When a woman is elected, it is assumed that two people have been elected” (43). Uyi’s reason for this assertion is not unconnected to the fact that most Africa cultures allow men to pay bride price to legalize their marriage. After this ritual has been performed, the woman is expected to constantly cook for her husband but not ordering food from food vendors or restaurants where the cooks do not “know how to blend the traditional spices to flavour” soup as housewives do. Besides, the breastfeeding of babies would also be difficult if a woman is elected president and her matrimonial home neglected or managed by housemaids and personal assistants. Despite the above reasons, Uyi Odaro sees the need to end women oppression, hence, he asks Terna, thus; “Are we not tired of playing this game? Are we not tired of marginalizing women and trying to suppress their voices? Look here, Alhaji Sani and company, I will accept no vice-presidential ticket or any other, not even presidential. My votes will be cast for Prof. Nona and her running mate, Mr. Dandaura whether you like it or not. Stop this scheming. For once, give these women a chance” (54). The mindset of most African men to keep the womenfolk in perpetual slavery in the area of politics must change for meaningful development to strive in Nigeria. In acknowledging the foregoing, Nona alludes to “the reign of women kings” in Benin “centuries ago when the traditional institution controlled the affairs of women and men. Now we are in the twenty first century where the national constitution is only deciding factor” (55).

In Salami-Ogunloye’s *More Than Dancing* on the other hand, the adverse effects of culture and traditions on female characters are prominence. For instance, in the play, Obawale of Benin appreciates Chief Iyase, head of the *Eghavbo-no’ore* and Prime Minister of the Benin Kingdom with his eldest daughter without her

consent, thus:

Ewuare: My daughter Edeleyo, from this day, Chief Iyase has become your husband. The pigeon never marries two husband. So, Chief Iyase becomes your partner for life. Go, my daughter. I say, go in peace and tranquillity; nothing will be difficult for you in your new home, for the knife never find the okra difficult to cut.
Edeleyo: Father, your wish is my command and your pleasure is my reward (p.5).

The playwright presents a traditional society where customs and traditions are not religiously obeyed and the pronouncements of the monarch are unquestionable as in the character of Edeleyo above. Women's voices are unheard, their emotions and complaints are disregarded because the men can marry several of them into their harems. The men specifically Oba Ewuare spells out the responsibilities of women which include nurturing and teaching children about customs and traditions. In most Nigerian societies, the traditions empower traditional rulers customarily marry whoever pleases them in their kingdoms. Chief Ogieka affirms this by responding to the message delivered by Chief Uwangue: "Take it step-by-step, Chief Uwangue. Oba Ewuare is asking for your daughter's hand in marriage? What have I done to deserve this great honour?" (17) To Ogieka, the Oba has honoured him by deciding to marry his daughter but Ubi rejects this offer by asking her mother pertinent questions: "Iye, why should I be compelled to marry a man I hardly know or love? Shouldn't my husband ask for my hand in marriage himself? Am I not entitled to my own choice?" (22). All these questions have faulted the long-aged customs of arranged marriages and that of forcing young girls into marriage against their wish.

The play reveals that the refusal of the Oba's marriage offer has consequential effect on his desired bride. This aspect of the Benin customs and traditions is affirmed by Omoze while conversing with Ubi over the Oba Ewuare's request: "if you refuse to marry Omo, you will hardly ever get any man who will be willing to marry you since Omo has already indicated interest in you. No man will dare ask for your hand

again" (22). Through the character of Ubi, the playwright condemns forceful marriage which customs and traditions uphold in society. At this juncture, the heroine resolves to change the status quo: "Nothing is permanent in this world. Everything is subject to change no matter how long the practice has been. Marriage is a relationship between two people who are in love. Not between two strangers; not between numerous people either. I will not become a fish amongst other fish in the ocean simply because I want to marry a king. No mother, that is not my idea of marriage" (23). Ubi represents modern women who need changes in every aspect of our socio-cultural, political and religious life. Apart from her struggle for liberation of women from the stronghold of patriarchal, she is determined to acquire economic power by asking the Oba to "send messengers to Owo, Akure, Ikale," to remit their tributes directly to her. She also requests that part of the Benin Kingdom be handled over to her as the Queen of Oba Ewuare. These are protest indicators that almost claimed lives and property in the royal palace as chronicled by the playwright in this text.

Findings from the Texts

This study is concerned with protest in Nigerian female dramaturgy and findings revealed that cultural inhibitions perpetuated and reinforced by patriarchal norms relegate women to the margins and continue to devalue their dignity and worth. These cultural inhibitions affect girls and women and constitute a serious threat to their 'human rights'. The Nigerian women can break the chains withholding their social-political and economic development. Though female protest is seen as a threat to patriarchy, it is a very vital medium of sensitising and mobilising the members of society to some burning issues which society need to address in order to promote fairness, justice, equity and development. With the calibre of Ubi in *The Queen Sisters* and Prof. Nona in *More Than Dancing* emerging in our society, it is evident that society will begin to address and re-address the role of women in order to provide a robust space for them as everyone in the society need to take the responsibility of deconstructing negative cultural and political images and roles of women and reconstruct worthy images and roles

for them.

Conclusion

Salami-Agunloye's *The Queen Sisters* and *More Than Dancing* reveal cultural and political practices in our society that put impediments on women empowerment and progress. The playwright highlights the need for the transformation of existing socio-cultural and political traditions and beliefs with a view to creating an equitable environment where women would enjoy equal rights with men. She supports the agitations for one's right, rejects all forms of imposition of the male gender over the female and beckons on the women to rise up for the challenge to deconstruct and dismantle all forms of cultural and political entanglements. She equally recommends a non-violent approach to peaceful protest in resolving conflict and urges the male gender to embrace and work towards attitudinal change and stop relating to women from the standpoint of those rigid traditions, cultural/political codes and unwritten laws that have devalued women over the years as portrayed in *The Queen Sisters* and *More Than Dancing*.

Recommendations

The playwright has demonstrated that women protests in society have existed from the colonial period till date and these have been documented in dramatic works. Their struggles were for the betterment of their people as in the

case of the foremothers. Based on the foregoing, this study makes the following recommendations.

- i. The marginalization and suppression of women should be stopped in order to promote rapid growth and development in society.
- ii. There should be equality, justice and fair-play among members of political parties irrespective of gender. Women should be allowed to aspire to any leadership position with the total support of men to enable them contribute their quota to the development of the country.
- iii. The fundamental rights of women should be respected in socio-cultural, religious and political settings in order to foster peace and harmonious co-existence.
- iv. The socio-cultural construct that women are appendages, myopic, antagonistic and dependent must be erased completion from our minds.
- v. The cultural practice of forceful or arranged marriages should be discouraged because this can trigger protest and destruction of lives and property in society.
- vi. People should endeavour to reflect on past experiences especially those documented in literary works to improve their wellbeing.

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