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The "Chauvinistic" Men of Julie Okoh: Victims of Feminist Bias

ABSTRACT. The paper interrogates Julie Okoh's sense of commitment to the feminist struggle. Using her plays as case studies, the paper presents Okoh as one of the most passionate, emotional and bias feminist playwrights in Nigeria. The argument canvassed in this paper includes that in Okoh's dramaturgy, women are portrayed far better than their men counterpart. The research is fundamentally literary in methodology and qualitative in approach with some of Okoh's selected plays as primary source materials. The major finding in the study is that Okoh is one of the few Nigerian playwrights that have demonstrated ideological commitments in their dramaturgies. The study also observed that the feminist project, especially as portrayed in Nigerian drama, is unremorsefully hostile to patriarchy. It is in the light of the above that the paper advocates the need for Nigerian playwrights to show ideological commitment in their plays. Nigerian feminist playwrights are also encouraged to always strike a gender balance in the delineation of characters in their plays. It is hoped that such gender balancing would facilitate gender equality which the feminist project sets out to achieve.

KEYWORDS: Chauvinism, Feminism, Gender and Dramaturgy

Introduction

Since its global prominence in literary criticism and discourse spanning from the late 19th century, the term feminism has been subjected to varieties of definitions, criticisms, literary works (drama, prose and poetry) and practical applications. As a literary projection which gained its tap root from the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China in the year 1995, feminism has been given a generous number of interpretations and perspectives which tend to impinge on the existing worldviews, values, customs and traditions of the respective cultural sets of mankind. Expectedly, feminism, in any form of interpretation, seems to have been greeted with consistent and spontaneous resistance in Africa as a result of the preponderance of patriarchal values.

In Nigeria, for instance, several feminist literary works exist alongside counter-feminist works. It is unarguable that since the institutionalization of feminism into global literary discourse, the Nigerian literary landscape has been engaged with a generous number of feminist literatures aimed at extolling feminist virtues and ideologies. In a parallel vein, there have been varieties of critical literary works inspired by the need to debunk feminist extremes which the critics consider threat to the long-held patriarchal values inherent in the culture and tradition of an average Nigerian community.

Propelled by the need to propagate patriarchy as one of the frontiers of indigenous African culture, such Nigerian playwrights as Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Zulu Sofola, Ahmed Yerima and Henry Bell-Gam among others have crafted plays that portray women (whether as wives or mothers) as instruments whose existential essence is mainly to assist men in the actualization of their masculinity and sense of fulfillment in life. It is this seeming chauvinistic position that has birthed the harvest of feminist plays that have graced the Nigerian dramaturgical landscape in present times. In a conscious attempt to debunk gender stereotyping as evident in most African customs and tradition, a crop of Nigerian playwrights (mostly females) have set in motion a harvest of feminist plays that challenge the patriarchal dogmas inherent in the plays of the earlier generation playwrights. Playwrights in this bracket would include but not limited to Tess Onwueme, Stella Oyedepo, Julie Okoh, Irene Salami and Tracy Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh. At first, these crops of playwrights where identified as solo feminist voices from the fringe, but as they continued to soar in their ideological commitment, they amassed for themselves and by extension, their feminist campaign, a large portion of creative relevance in the overall Nigerian dramatic space. Little wonder, these voices alongside their mentees in the feminist crusade have become forces to reckon with as long as African feminist discourse is concerned.

Interestingly, Nigerian feminist playwrights vary in their dramaturgical responses to the negative and inferior portrayal of womanhood in the works of the older generation playwrights. Apart from labeling the older writers as “male chauvinists”, the feminist playwrights also accuse them of hiding under the mask of patriarchy to subdue and subjugate women into accepting the facade that they are inferior to their men in all ramifications. For Tess Onwueme and Irene Salami, the role of women in mainstream leadership spans from the pre-colonial times when women

took up the Herculean task of leading their empires into work and returning victorious. Stella Oyedepo as well as Tracy Chima Uto-Ezeajuh are more interested in showcasing the "New Woman" who has been liberated from the shackles of patriarchy and gone ahead to occupy strategic political positions where men bow to her authority. On her part, Julie Okoh is mainly concerned with the psychological trauma which men subject women into in their (men's) attempt to demonstrate their superiority over the latter. It is along this trajectory of pity for women that the paper examines Okoh's portrayal of her lead male characters as either chauvinistic or wicked or both. Part of the business of the paper also is to examine the depth of Okoh's feminist biases and un biases in the portrayal of her male characters.

The Concept of Gender

Research has shown that the terms sex and gender are often used interchangeably. Mike Haralambos and Martin Holborn, in their book entitled *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, observe that many writers use the distinction between sex and gender as the starting point for their analysis. From a historical perspective, they inform that:

> The first person to make this distinction was the American psychoanalyst Robert Stoller. Stoller made the commonsense observation that vast majority of the population can clearly be categorized as male or female according to their physical characteristics: 'external genitalia, internal genitalia, gonads (the organs which produce sex cells), hormonal states and secondary sex characteristics'. Because of these differences, women are capable of bearing and suckling children, whereas men are not. In addition, differences in physique between men and women usually mean that men are stronger and more muscular" (Stoller, 1968, p. 94).

Biological differences are widely believed to be responsible for the differences in both the behavior of men and women and the roles they play in society. However, Robert Stoller cautioned against such an assumption contending that:

> Gender is a term that has psychological and cultural connotations, if the proper terms for sex are 'male' and 'female', the corresponding terms for gender are 'masculine' and 'feminine'; these latter might be quite independent of (biological) sex (Stoller, 1968, p. 9).

The deduction to make out of Stoller's analogy above is that it does not necessarily follow that being a woman means behaving in a 'feminine', nor that being a man means behaving in a 'musculine' way. For him, girls are not necessarily caring and compassionate just as boys do not have to be aggressive and competitive. Haralambos and Holborn add that though not all sociologists of gender and feminism support Stoller's position, it is not also immediately obvious that how their claims can be justified. For Haralambos and Holborn, the belief that it is natural for women and men behave differently is widespread, and is supported by many scientists and some psychologists and sociologists.

There have been a number a number of attempts to relate sex differences to differences in the behavior of men and women by using evolutionary ideas. One of these attempts, which seem to be the most influential today is the concept of "sociobiology" which was developed by Wilson in the year 1975 and further applied to sex and gender by David Barash in 1979. The concept is based in part on Charles Darwin's *Theory of Evolution*. Haralambos and Holborn add that the concept it goes well beyond Darwin's original theory (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004, p. 96). Like Darwin, sociobiologists believe that humans and other species develop and change through a process of natural selection. Individuals of a species vary in their physical characteristics, and from this point of view, those which are best adapted to their environment are most likely to survive and reproduce. Since offspring tend to have characteristics similar to those of their parents due to genetic inheritance, the characteristics of a species can change as the fittest survives. According to Haralambos and Holborn, Sociobiologists go beyond Darwin in two main ways, thus:

> 1 They argue that it is not just physical characteristics that evolve but also behaviour. 2 They believe that behaviour in animals and humans is governed by a genetic instruction to maximize the chances of passing on their genes to future generations by breeding-that is, they try to ensure that they have offspring which survive. At the heart of sociobiology's attempt to explain sex differences in the behaviour of female and male humans is the claim that the two sexes employ different strategies to maximize their chances of passing on their genes (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004, p. 96).

The chief argument raised by Wilson and Barash in their sociobiologist concept is that different reproductive strategies produce different behaviour in males and females and also lead them to occupy different

social roles. That, in terms of sexual behaviour, men are likely to be more promiscuous, while women will be more circumspect in their pursuit of the best possible genetic partner. Wilson argues that "It pays males to be aggressive, hasty, fickle and undiscriminating". According to him, in theory, it is more profitable for women to be coy, to hold back until they can identify males with the best possible genes (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004, p. 96). Drawing from Wilson and Barash's analogies, sociobiologists believe that women can tolerate infidelity by their partners more readily than men. That infidelity by men has little cost for women, but if the woman is unfaithful, the man may devote energy to raising someone else's child.

For George Peter Murdock, the biological differences between men and women are the basis of the sexual division of labour in society. However, Murdock did not suggest that men and women are directed by genetically based predispositions or characteristics to adopt their particular roles. Rather, he simply suggested that biological differences, such as the greater physical strength of men and the fact that women bear children, lead to gender roles out of sheer practicality. He argues further that "Given the biological differences between men and women, a sexual division of labour is the most efficient way of organizing society" (Murdock, 1949, p. 6). In a cross-cultural survey of two hundred and twenty four societies, ranging from hunting and gathering bands to modern nation-states, Murdock examined the activities assigned to men and women and in the process, he found tasks such as hunting, lumbering and mining to be predominantly male roles and cooking, gathering wild vegetable products, water carrying and making and repairing clothes to be largely female roles. According to him:

> Man with his superior physical strength can better undertake the more strenuous tasks, such as lumbering, mining, quarrying, land-clearance and housebuilding. Not handicapped, as is woman by the physiological burdens of pregnancy and nursing, he can range farther afield to hunt, to fish, to herd and trade. Woman is at no disadvantage, however, in lighter tasks which can be performed in or near the home , e.g.the gathering of vegetable products, the fetching of water, the preparation of food, and the manufacture of clothing and utensils (Murdock, 1949, p. 7).

Murdock's submission as stipulated above is that the sexual division of labour was present in all of the societies especially those in his samples and concludes that the advantages inherent in a division of labour

by sex presumably account for its universality. Talcott Parson in his article entitled "The American Family: Its Relations to Personality and Social Structure" corroborates Murdock's position when he argues that there had to be a clear-cut sexual division of labour for the family to operate efficiently as a social system, and that the instrumental and expressive roles complemented each other and promoted family solidarity. However, Murdock and Parson's concept of sexually determined division of labour have been subjected to several criticisms prominent among these critique is Ann Oakley's concept of cultural division of labour where she explicitly rejects the notion that that there any natural or inevitable division of labour or allocation of social roles on the basis of sex. Against this backdrop, she argues that:

> Not only is the division of labour by sex not universal, but there is no reason why it should be. Human cultures are diverse and endlessly variable. They owe their creation to human inventiveness rather than invincible biological forces (Oakley, 194, p. 9).

The focus of Oakley's argument is that gender roles are culturally rather than biologically determined since comparisons between different cultures show that the behaviour and roles of men and women are highly variable. She believes that gender roles are culturally rather than biologically produced. The crux of Oakley's thesis is that whatever the biological differences between males and females, it is culture of a society that exerts most influence in the creation of masculine and feminine behaviour. It is against this backdrop that patriarchy serves as the anchor on which men unleash oppression and superiority on the women.

Feminism: A Conceptual Overview

The term feminism has been subjected to a harvest of definitions since its inculcation into mainstream literary discourse. These definitions are influenced by the prevailing thesis that the definition intends to underscore. For Barbara Berg feminism:

> …is the freedom (for a woman) to decide her own destiny: freedom from sex determined role; freedom from society's oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action. Feminism demands the acceptance of woman's right to individual conscience and judgment. It postulates that women's essential worth stems from their

> common humanity and does not depend on the relationships of her life (Berg, 1984, p. 24).

Ann Taylor corroborates Berg's definition when she explains that feminism is a protest against the institutionalized injustice perpetrated by men, as a group, and advocates the elimination of that injustice by challenging the various structures of authority or power that legitimize male prerogatives in a given society. From a sociological dimension, feminism aims at effecting changes in the prevailing social structures. It incorporates political activism and ideological stance. From ideological perspective, feminism aims at examining and analyzing the situation of women in societies by exposing the complexity of male domination and female subordination with the hope of liberating women from masculine vision of life which has, in various dimensions in different historical periods, deified male values to the detriment of women's ethos.

According to Julie Okoh, feminists believe that the destruction of all forms of inequality and oppression will lead to the creation of a more just, social and economic structures that will facilitate women's participation in national development and in international struggle for economic globalization and solidarity (Okoh, 2012, p. 12). Feminism is about making people aware of the secondary position women had, too often, been forced to occupy in social and political structure. She adds that a broad understanding of feminism includes the acting, speaking, writing and advocating on behalf of women's issues and rights, and identifying injustice to women in society. For Okoh, the term feminism has a long span of history. In her analogy, the root of feminism began with the devaluation of the goddesses in primitive societies (Okoh, 2000, p. 9). She adds that discrimination against women was first institutionalized with the development of city states in ancient Greece. According to her:

> The Greek major thinkers and writers stressed the need for female subordination. Natural law philosophers in particular, claimed that the inferior status of women was due to their "inner nature." With the exception of Plato, they all believed that women had powerful emotion and inferior brains with an IQ lower than that of the male children. Hence, women could harm themselves as well as others. Therefore, it was necessary to protect women from harming themselves, and if possible, incapacitate them. Based on this belief, each woman in the city states of ancient Greece had her own guardian (usually a father, brother, husband or a male relative) under whose protection and control she lived for her entire life. All the Greek natural law philo-

> sophers came to regard women along with children and slaves as neither "rational" nor "civilized" (Okoh, 2000, p. 57).

Drawing from Sawyer's thesis, Okoh argues that since Aristotle defined the female as defective and the male as normative, male slaves had the responsibility for the early education of boys rather than their mother (Okoh, 2002, p. 17). Okoh concludes her argument by declaring that the preponderance of female subjugation in Ancient Greece serves as the precursor to the feminist movement. Th**e** deduction from the various definitions of feminism is that it is a collective term for systems of belief and theories that pay special attention to women's rights and women's position in culture and society.

The Image of Male Characters in Julie Okoh's Plays

It is stating the obvious that Okoh's plays portray the image of men from an undiluted patriarchal perspective where the male characters feature more as antagonists with villainous tendencies. This trend runs from her earlier works to her later plays where she compensates the men with an infinitesimal dose of positive portrayal of the men as evident in the characters of Professor Tanka in *Our Wife Forever* (2010) and Tamuno in *The Trials* (2008). Long before the uplift of men's corporate image in her later works, Okoh's earlier works such as *The Mannequins* (1997), *Mask* (1997), *In the Fullness of Time* (2000) and *Edewede* (2000) have presented men either as promiscuous husbands, paedophiles, bullies, idle breadwinners and self-centred companions among others. In *Mask*, Mr Alfred Okosun is portrayed as a heartless and inconsiderate husband who has no regards for the supposed sanctity of marriage. He flaunts his marital vows and goes ahead to relish an illicit emotional relationship with Nkechi, a girl of eighteen who is also the best friend of his only daughter. Mrs Okosun gets wind of her husband's extra-marital affairs with a supposed family friend and unable to bare the heartbreak, she gets depressed to the point of experiencing a severe nervous breakdown. Similarly, Omena, their only daughter, gets disillusioned about her father's irresponsible act and develops a mind-set geared towards hatred for the men folk. Here, Okoh portrays men not just as cheating husbands and paedophiles but as frivolous fathers who seldom find time to nurture their children under the excuse of being too occupied with office matters.

Okoh extends her portrayal of men as wicked fathers in *The Mannequins* where Mr Dialey Adudu poses as a sex freak who cannot control his sexual libido to the ridiculous and consequently, tragic extent of abusing his thirteen year old daughter Iyere Iluobe whom he infests with the Vagina Vesico Fistula (VVF)—a disease that destroys the woman's reproductive organs. Similar with the experiences of Mr Okosun in *Mask*, Mr Adudu's extra-marital engagement with teenagers brings about a major communication break down between him and his wife. On her part, Etemini, Adudu's wife feels traumatized about her husband's sexual reckless and undying romantic appetite for female teenagers. In this play, Okoh portrays men, as evident in the character delineation of Adudu, the lead male character as sex maniacs who put sex ahead of any other value in life. In spite of his enhanced economic status, Adudu is conceived in the society of the play as an unfaithful husband, irresponsible father, vindictive boss and a corrupt manager who throws caution to the wind just for a round of sex. He goes about abandoning women to their fate after putting them in a family way. In the end, Adudu is humiliated publicly and disgraced out of office by a collaboration of his staff and government machineries. Similarly, another major male character in the play, Agboga Igberaese, Adudu's best friend and colleague, who is supposed to admonish Adudu against sexual recklessness, is also not spared of male chauvinistic philosophies especially as it concerns polygamy. He advises Adudu to emulate him by converting all his concubines into full time wives rather than "…just… attract her for …pleasure and nothing more" (Okoh, 1998, p. 21).

In *Edewede*, Okoh tries to portray the men in some positive light by sparing them of the usual stigma of rape, sexual recklessness, extra-marital entanglements and frivolous fatherhood. However, the play opens on a rather discrediting note for the men as Okoh heaps the blame of female circumcision on patriarchy which in turn sets out to celebrate the superiority of men over women. Here, men are seen as collective chauvinists who are bent on suppressing and oppressing the women as well as imbuing in them a sense of inferiority through the violence of circumcision. In this play, Ordia, Edewede's husband and the lead male character, is portrayed as a coward who cannot defend his wife and daughter from such societal inhibitions as female genital mutilation. Though, Ordia understands Edewede's plight as regards female circumcision but lacks the will power to resist his mother's (Ebikere) insistence on getting Oseme, their daughter, circumcised. Here Okoh, through the

character of Ordia, presents men as weaklings who cannot think but bow sheepishly to such bogus patriarchal tradition as female genital mutilation. The deduction here is that Okoh has subjected men again to the guilt of patriarchal extremes aimed at enslaving women through the machinery of circumcision.

In *Closed Doors*, one of Okoh's early 21st century plays, male characters are obviously scarce save for their being mentioned as offstage references. Nevertheless, the male characters mentioned offstage in the play are not also devoid of the usual negative behavioural attributes that runs in most Okoh's plays. *Closed Doors* is a serial diary of men's onslaught on women in a bid to demonstrate their superiority over the latter. In this play, the inmates of GOODWILL NURSING HOME (all pregnant women) bemoan the predicaments surrounding their pregnancies as occasioned by their supposed lovers (men). Bola, one of the inmates in the nursing home, is relieved of her banking job for getting pregnant. Ironically, the order for the termination of her job was dished by her boss who is also responsible for her pregnancy. Tracy, the heroine of the play and one of the inmates, is marked for assassination by the same man that is responsible for her pregnancy. The reason for the assassination attempt on Tracy is because her lover, who is also a desperate politician as well as a family man, considers her pregnancy potential material for political blackmail. Amina, a girl of thirteen and the youngest of the inmates, gets pregnant through the process of a serial gang rape by herds men. Belema's pregnancy comes through the machinations of her own school teacher, who, ab initio, promised her heaven on earth. The deduction from these testimonies is that all the male characters responsible for these pregnancies are morally bankrupt and heartless to the dangerous extent of thwarting the supposed bright futures of these "innocent" young girls and teenagers.

Our Wife Forever stands out as one of the few plays of Okoh that tries to portray men as considerate, loving, caring and compromising beings using the character of Professor Tanka. Tanka, unlike the usual male chauvinists that inhabit Okoh's dramatic universe, shows Victoria, his late friend's wife, all the necessary affection, care and love every woman would envisage from her husband. He stands by Victoria throughout her trying times by the machinations of her brother-in-law, Chief Thomas Imodu. Tanka's affection for Victoria builds to a romantic crescendo whereby both of them get yoked together in marriage. Through the character of Tanka, Okoh tries to portray men as respecters of the fun-

damental human rights of the women. But typical of Okoh's sense of ideological commitment, men cannot be completely exonerated of oppressive tendencies, hence, the portrayal of the character of Chief Thomas Imodu who does not only stand out as the antagonist in the play but also the voice of patriarchal extremes. Hiding under the umbrella of tradition, Thomas, pressurizes Victoria to forfeit all her late husband's wealth and surrender herself to be inherited by him in accordance with the traditional and customary law of window inheritance. At first, Thomas seems to have had his way but with the joint forces of Victoria and Prof. Tanka, the former is brought to pillory and humiliation. Here, Okoh celebrates the dismantling of patriarchy not just by the women but by their male sympathizers as symbolized in Tanka.

The crux of our analogy here is that Okoh's plays, regardless of their generic, geographical and periodical make ups, portray men as violators of the inalienable rights of women. Even in plays where some male characters are ascribed positive and moral qualities, the antagonists are usually men who are dogged and undaunted in their propagation of patriarchal values.

Men as Victims of Julie Okoh's Feminist Bias

In his critical essay titled "A House Divided: Feminism in African Literature", Nnolim states that:

> If the female writers live in a house divided, their counterparts who are critics are much more united in a single-minded effort to carry the fight to the court of the male writers who are their …enemy, the agent of their disparaged position, their oppressors. This might be a case of misplaced hostility, for the debasement of the female image is as old as the Bible and the Koran, and has other origins in pre-historic literature and mythology. (Chukwuma, 1994, p. 258)

The position above serves as a cue for our critical excursion into Okoh's dramatic universe where men are often tongue-lashed and ascribed with satanic attributes; a universe where men are portrayed as devil's incarnates; a universe where men consistently oppress and subdue women through the machinations of patriarchy; a universe where women are predominantly portrayed as angels and heroes and men, devils and tyrants. It cannot be over emphasized that Okoh's gender-

sensitive plays are feministic to the extent that one hardly comes across a morally sound male character.

In *Closed Doors*, all the references to male characters are derogatory and uncomplimentary. First, the owner of the Goodwill Nursing Home is a man "who is out to exploit pregnant young girls and teenagers by offering them the option to either pay huge bills for abortion or give birth so the children can be adopted for huge amounts of money. Tracy, the heroine of the play, is a portrayed as a nineteen year old pre-University student who parts ways with her decent family upbringing and engages illicit affairs and in the process, she gets pregnant but rather than blame her for her immoral dispositions, Okoh shifts all the blame to the man responsible for the pregnancy. On her part, Tracy prefers brooding over her being abandoned by Michael, her childhood lover and her "Big Politician" sugar daddy rather than blame herself for flouting the supposed moral decency and rectitude of her family. In Tracy's moments of psychological trauma, the playwright, through the character of the Chief Nymph, makes conscious effort to revitalize her self—esteem as she charges her, thus:

> CHIEF NYMPH: A heroine is one who lives in hope when faced with challenges. Like the beautiful phoenix bird that burns itself at a stake only to rise up later from the ashes reborn, Go on! Call forth all your traumatic experiences. Bring out all the buried secrets. Purge them into the fire of gestation (*After blessing TRACY, MOTHER EARTH stretches out her magic wand to touch TRACY*) (Okoh, 2007, p. 45–46).

The fortification and blessings showered on Tracy by Mother Earth in the excerpt above seem to suggest that the playwright has exonerated Tracy from the immoral act of pre-marital sex especially with an advanced influential politician – a man old enough to be her father. The playwright's concern in the play is to portray men's inhuman treatment towards women rather than the latter's sexual recklessness and obvious lack of social etiquette. Bola, the most composed of all the inmates, also flouts the rule of the bank where she works which stipulates that newly employed staff must abstain from pregnancy for at least three years from the day of assumption of duty or face the penalty of being fired. Bola does not only flout the rules of her employer but does so with her direct boss, the branch manager of her bank yet the playwright exonerates her of this immoral and unethical act and puts all the blame on her manager (man) for his "wickedness and heartlessness". Similarly, Bele-

ma, another inmate and a secondary school student, derails from seeking genuine knowledge from her teacher and mentor and gets erotically attracted to him and in the end, he she gets pregnant but as usual, the playwright heaps all the blame on the teacher (man). Without an iota of remorse and self- blame, Belema laments, thus:

> …He told me he loved me. Foolish me, I believed him completely. It was only when I got pregnant that I discovered that he had played the same game on many other girls in the school (Okoh, 2007, p. 25).

Belema's lamentation above does not suggest that she was raped or harassed by her teacher but that she succumbed to his wooing antics only to be deceived after being impregnated. One would have expected the playwright to apportion a significant dose of blame to Belema for being sexually reckless and loose at a point in her life where she was expected to demonstrate moral rectitude. But as a result of Okoh's in-depth feminist dramatic stance, all the blame for Belema's pregnancy and misfortune are channeled towards her teacher for being treacherous and insincere in their relationship. Similarly, Eki, the oldest and most adventurous of all the inmates, resorts to prostitution because her uncles (men) impoverished her and her siblings by confiscating their properties after their father's death. Eki's attempt to justify her resort to prostitution in order to fend for her siblings seems to suggest that the playwright is advocating for commercial sex work as a liberal pathway to economic breakthrough in a country like Nigeria where such menial jobs as petty trading, cleaning, crafts, nanny, food vendor and farming among others, constitute modest means of livelihood. Expectedly, Eki gets abandoned after being impregnated but rather than blame herself for resorting to immorality (commercial sex work) as the ultimate source of livelihood, she, quite characteristic of the other inmates, transfers all her aggression to men in general whether as greedy uncles, irresponsible policemen on duty or sexually bellicose sugar daddies. As she puts it:

> Men! They are difficult to understand. When they want a woman, they are all over her. She is their darling, their sugar-sugar, their honey-honey, their succour; the air they breathe in, the light they see with, the energy that keeps them active. Every seductive adjective one can think of is lavished on the woman. But once they get her, she becomes the obstacle in their way, a black devil or even mere garbage to be dumped into a dust-bin (Okoh, 2007, p. 52)

Eki's lamentation above clearly suggests that she does not have a moment remorse for choosing the path of commercial sex work in a country where entrepreneurial skills can afford one livelihood. Of all the inmates, perhaps, Amina's case appears the most pathetic since she was raped serially by a group of herdsmen. But the playwright prefers to put the blame on men rather than on poor and insensitive leadership in the country that has is unable to birth an effective judiciary that would bring perpetrators of rape to justice. Even when Bola's pregnancy was attributed to a bank manager, Belema's to her school teacher and Amina's to unidentified herdsmen, the playwright prefers to apportion all the blame for the pregnancies and abandonment of the inmates to politicians (men) just to underscore her ideological commitment that men are evil and wicked. In an attempt to conceal her female chauvinistic tendencies, Okoh presents men's sense of moral bankruptcy through the mask of politicians, thus:

> AMINA: Oh, I no been know say politician them be thief.
> EKI: Yes, my dear little girl, they are all thieves…
> AMINA: But, wetin dem dey do with all the money wey dem dey thief?
> BELEMA: Who knows?
> EKI: They use it to seduce women. Look at all of us. Are we not victims of their insatiable quest for pleasure?
> BELEMA: Oh yes, we are. They seduce us, use us and abandon us, That is very unfair.
> BOLA: As if that is not enough, they turn around to stab us in the back.
> TRACY: They send assassins after us.
> BELEMA: After killing us, they remove from us those very organs that they once cherished, to make juju medicine that will make them strong and invincible… (Okoh, 2007, p. 56)

The playwright's merging of men and politicians as a homogenous entity that seduce , abuse and maim women is indicative of her deliberate ploy to exonerate Nigerian female politicians from all the decay and decadence in the nation's political space. This, again exposes Okoh's subtle feminist bias against men. Tracy, the heroine of the play lacks the moral rectitude to blame men for her misfortune having gone against her family values. She acknowledges that her father (a man) is opposed to her teenage pregnancy, thus:

> TRACY: My father couldn't take it when he found out. He drove me out of the house. As I was outside the gate thinking of where to go, I could hear yelling

> at my mother, abusing her, beating her. I heard her crying, begging him for mercy. (Hysterically) Oh!… He must have pushed her down!…He has a gun in his drawer! He is coming after me! I must run from here before he comes!… (Okoh, 2007, p. 18)

Tracy's narration above gives credence to the logic that her father, like most Nigerian fathers (politicians inclusive) are opposed to the social anomaly of teenage sexual harassment and pregnancy. It also goes to show that immoral behaviour is individualistic and not an exclusive of the men folk as portrayed in Okoh's *Closed Doors*. It can also be argued that Tracy's father, in an attempt to demonstrate fatherly care, concern and affection towards his daughter, must have expressed his concerns for Tracy's social excesses in the past but must have been ignored by Tracy's mother in a typical African idiosyncrasy whereby mothers feel obliged to give their children especially females some social cum sexual protection. Little wonder, Tracy's father transfers the aggression of his daughter's teenage pregnancy to the mother.

Another manifestation of Okoh's feminist bias in *Closed Doors* is in the area of the management of the Goodwill Nursing Home. The playwright is aware that the profession of gynaecology cuts across the sexes meaning that the goodwill Nursing Home could have also been run by a female doctor. But she prefers to portray a male doctor in such dubious, corrupt and inhumane character delineation in order to amplify her feminist stance and commitment. Even when the playwright presents Nurse Chioma, a female character in the nursing home, to be harsh, uncompromising and mercantilist to her fellow women in order to modify her excessive negative portrayal of men in her works, it becomes more glaring that men are still her chief target since Nurse Chioma only acts on the orders of her boss, the proprietor of GOODWILL NURSING HOME, a man. The playwright goes further to introduce the character of the Orderly, another offstage male character who contributes little or nothing to the plot of the play except that he is mentioned in order to buttress the playwright's mantra of men's inhuman disposition towards women. In this play, the Orderly is subjected to castigation and public pillory by the inmates who claim that he is bossy and inconsiderate yet no concrete action is ascribed to him from the beginning to the end of the play. Nnolim amplifies the sexist sentiment in Okoh's dramaturgy, thus:

> Feminism takes centre stage in…Julie Okoh's dramaturgy. Her major technique is inflationary in characterizing women and deflationary in the depic-

> tion of men. That is, women are created as better than their male counterparts, all the male characters are far worse. (Nnolim, 1994, p. 248–261)

Nnolim's critique above summarizes the gamut of Okoh's dramaturgy. Mr Okosun in *Mask* is portrayed as an irresponsible husband and father who cannot control his libido let alone attend to his paternal responsibilities at the home front. He engages in an illicit affair with Nkechi, his daughter's school friend but when the illicit relationship is exposed, Mr Okosun alone receives the heat at home to the point of being poisoned by his wife while Nkechi continues to pride herself as an achiever without any form of remorse. The same dose of irresponsible characterization rubs on Mr Adudu both in *In the Fullness of Time* and *The Manequins* where he is portrayed as an embodiment of oppression, tyranny, dictatorship, sex abuse, infidelity and corruption among others. In The Mannequins, Adudu goes about town intimidating young girls and impregnating them and in the end, he is made to pay for his immoral engagements by infesting his own daughter with Vagina Vesico Fistula (VVF) as well as being humiliated publicly out of his position as the manager of his company while his accomplices such as Mrs Odebo and Miss Bharo (women) are allowed to walk freely in the streets and boast of their illicit affair with another woman's husband.

In *Our Wife Forever* Okoh vests her dramatic feminist antagonism against men most by using Victoria, the heroine of the play to bring patriarchy (as symbolized in the character of Chief Thomas Imodu) to ridicule and pillory. In an attempt to argue that patriarchy is a product of illiteracy and atavistic cultural practice, Okoh presents Prof. Tanka, an educated man as Victoria's ally in her fight against patriarchy and by extension, male domination. Expectedly and typical of Okoh's dramaturgy, Thomas (men), the antagonist in the play is wicked, heartless, inhuman, unsociable, flirtatious, greedy and bossy amongst other negative attributes. He is different from Okoh's conception of the "new man" who is caring, tolerant, respectful, friendly, humble and kind as exemplified in the character of Hector, Victoria's late husband and later, Prof. Tanka. Having assisted Victoria to defeat Thomas and his bogus patriarchal ideologies, Prof. Tanka unveils his protracted emotional feelings towards Victoria, his late friend's wife with the aim of marrying her. Prof. Tanka confesses his attraction to Victoria, thus:

> FELIX: Yes. Well, I started to experience in me the rebirth of forgotten tender feelings. At first, I tried to repress them, but they started growing inside

> me. I was confused and afraid. I didn't knowwhere they were leading me. So, I decided to stop coming to your house, hoping that the distance would kill the feelings (Okah, 2010, p. 86).

Felix's confession above suggests that he has been lusting over his late friend's wife but didn't know how to broach the subject to her ab initio. In this sense, it can be argued that Felix's resolve to assist Victoria in her fight against Thomas is not borne out of his genuine concern for a late friend's wife but the usual care and concern which men extend to women that they love and admire. The deduction here is that the marriage between Victoria and Felix in the end portends some form of moral and traditional breach as well as betrayal of trust since Felix is supposed to serve merely as a backbone and surrogate uncle to Victoria and her children. Tanka constitutes a prototype of Okoh's heroes for daring patriarchal values and lending his voice to the women struggle. It is ironical that such a character as Felix, with little or no regards for true friendship, would be accorded a heroic status. This can only be possible in Okoh's brand of feminist plays where women are saints and blameless and men, devils and culprits. It can also be argued further that Okoh deliberately yoked Felix and his late friend's wife in marriage in order to underscore the point that men are greedy and selfish to the ridiculous point of assisting their late friend's wives for a ransom-marriage.

Okoh's deflationary treatment of men in her plays transcends her feminist plays. In *Who Can Fight the Gods?*, the thematic emphasis is on university leadership and management, but Okoh deliberately rubs in the issue of gender just to buttress her saintly portrayal of women in a society where men are held responsible for all the social disorder. In this play, men are responsible for the corruption in the university system which should be a centre of excellence. The society of the play, as represented by the university convocation arena, is littered with dirt- a metaphor for corruption, which only women (First CWO, Second CWO and Third CWO) can clean as exemplified in the excerpt below:

> FIRST CWO: …This is not time to sit on the fence. This is not time to wag tongue and quarrel blindly among ourselves: Parity! Parity! Parity! This is time for us to unite to fight a common cause. SECOND CWO: Let us fight against corruption and injustice. THIRD CWO: Let us fight against megalomania, ostentation and wastage.
> FIRST CWO: Let us fight for the poor, the homeless and defenceless.

SECOND CWO: Let us fight for the marginalized. THIRD CWO: Let us fight for development and progress…
FIRST CWO: There is strength in unity. When the going is tough…
SECOND AND THIRD CWO: Women get going! (Okoh, 2002, p. 80–81)

The deduction from the excerpt is that the social order which every sane society yearns for can only be actualized by the women. Again, Okoh demonstrates her sexist bias in *Who Can Fight the Gods?*—a play that was originally crafted to address the issue of corruption, social decay and moral bankruptcy that have enveloped the university system in Nigeria. In this play, Okoh demonstrates some traits of an opportunist by using every dramatic space and atmosphere at her disposal to drive home her uncompromising feminist bias. What has been lavishly expressed in this paper is that Okoh's dramaturgical corpus advocates for a new African traditional order where patriarchal values would be upturned in favour of pseudo-egalitarianism (a society where both sexes are treated as equals) with the women having a better moral and rational pedigree.

Conclusion

The business of this paper has been to examine and evaluate the depth of feminist bias in Okoh's dramaturgy. Drawing from a panoramic assessment of her works, the paper raises a strong argument as it presents Okoh's dramatic canvass as being bias in its portrayal of men as evil geniuses and devil's incarnates while women are most often exonerated of their crimes. It is against this backdrop that the paper argues that Okoh's extreme negative portrayal male characters in her works, is an eloquent testimony of her uncompromising and unapologetic feminist stance. One apparent finding of this paper is that Okoh, in a bid to underscore the pitiable plight of the women folk in society, as evident in her plays, played to the gallery by making men appear worse than they are in real life. Whereas the paper acknowledges the need for writers, especially African writers, to be ideologically driven and committed in their works, it also cautions on the need for drama to always uphold the virtue of moderation and sincere reflections of the happenings in society. The paper advocates strongly the need for African writers to distinguish between ideological commitment and sexist sentiments. It also canvasses the need for feminist playwrights especially in Nigeria to always propagate the ideals of feminism rather than focus on the "odds" of patriarchy.

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