

## Shifting Grounds in Nigerian Literary Drama: The Third Generation of Writers

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### **Abstract**

*Most African literary critics stratified Nigerian dramatic landscape into three generations without adequately defining those factors that informed the division. However, based on close reading of the texts, it is discovered that the division was based on the dramatists' ideology and writing styles. The first generations of dramatists are considered as cultural liberation proponents, who discuss in their dramas nationalistic ideals, cultural re-affirmation and historical re-engineering. The second generations on the other hand are regarded as radical dramatists or the radical school. The third generation focuses on individual survival strategy in a hostile society without the idea of heroism. However, they crave for a just socio-political order in the Nigerian system by mirroring leadership crisis, military misadventure, national unity, political and ethnic rivalry, state oppression of the masses. Other issues that pervade their works include corruption and poverty, among other socio-economic issues and themes, and of course, the ravages of health and environmental matters. The themes of the drama of the recent playwrights, rather than being shaped and sharpened by the ideology of their predecessors, have been ordered more by the search for a spiritual*

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*solution to our socio-political problems. This paper seeks to give a detailed representation of the third generation of Nigerian dramatists by investigating the ideology that “separate and also link them to the earlier generations.”*

## **Introduction**

Nigerian dramatic landscape is *stratified* by literary critics into three generations (Gbanon: 2007), this is based on ideological perspective of the playwrights and their writing styles. This is contrary to Pius Aladesanmi’s position on [www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk](http://www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk) that age and year of publication are the reasons for the generational division of the Nigerian writers.

Though I am using the term “generation” in demarcating dramatic writings from Nigeria, I am not unaware of the various debates on both the relevance and irrelevance of periodizing literature from Wellek and Warren to Rehder, Childs, and Armstrong or Frederic Jameson’s “crisis” in periodization statement (Jameson quoted in Leonard Orr’s “Modernism and the Issue of Periodization”, in *Comparative Literature and Culture* Vol. 7, No. 1, (2005). I maintained the classifications in order to draw attention to the way Nigerian literature is partitioned and discussed by its major critics. Notable among the first generation of generation are James Ene Henshaw, Wole Soyinka, JP Clark, Ola Rotimi, Wale Ogunyemi and Zulu Sofola, (Julius-Adeoye: 2013). This is a generation of cultural liberation proponents, who discuss in their dramas nationalistic ideals, cultural re-affirmation and historical re-engineering (Obafemi: 1996). Dunton (1992) regards the second generation as “radical dramatists or the radical school.” (123). According to Dasylyva (2003) the generation is often represented with Femi Osofisan in the forefront, Bode Sowande, Kole Omotosho, and Tunde Fatunde. Dunton (2004) posits “the radical dramatists are committed through their plays to revolutionary change by Nigerian peasants and workers” (123). These dramatists were not interested in nationalistic drama of their predecessors. This is because the situation of the country has changed to neocolonialism, therefore they result to Marxism in their dramatic approach in order to seek a change in the corrupt system of government of the period. Moreover, this playwright, who just experienced a civil war caused by the *post-independent* Nigerian leaders

as a result of their corruption and ethnic based governance which did not allow for national ideology.

The third generation of Nigerian dramatists is defined not by nationalism, revolutionary aesthetic or Marxist ideology like the earlier generations, rather they are more interested in how an individual will survive within the society that gives them no hope of survival. Most of the dramatists within this group started their careers in the 1980's as a form of experimentation, but by the turn of the 1990's their *ideas* have become synonymous with their writings to warrant exploration by literary critics. Although the discussions that are compartmentalized into individual survival strategies are diverse, nevertheless they are geared towards a single direction 'emancipation'. These issues are defined within a sociopolitical context as 'emancipation' recognized individual survivalism which in-turn serves as strength for collective emancipation in the face of strangulating cultural and societal blocks. The female members have sharpened their voices and fervently aligned with the course of their gender. This does not mean that by discussing feminism, the female playwrights have abandoned the representation of other social, cultural and political subjects in their works. In fact, Irene Salami-Agunloye, has explored history of the Benin Kingdom in some of her drama, Foluke Ogunleye's drama looks at the decline of moral value among the youth of the Nigerian society, while Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh and Bunmi Julius-Adeoye prefer the treatment of socio-political issues.

### **The Dramatists and their Works**

While this paper will not pretend to have all the playwrights of the third generation captured, it will attempt a measure of objective representation of the visible playwrights at present by relying on published and or performed plays. The female members of the third generation have sharpened their voices and fervently aligned them with the course of their gender. Notable female third generations playwrights within this group voraciously articulate their ideology and penchant for social change. The lists include: Tess Onwueme (1955-) with *A Hen Too Soon* (1983), *Broken Calabash* (1984), *The Dessert Encroaches* (1985), *Ban Empty Barn, and other Plays* (1986), *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), *Legacies* (1989),

*Tell it to Woman: an Epic Drama* (1995), *Riot in Heaven: Drama for the Voices of Color* (1996), *The Missing Face* (1997), *Shakara: Dance-Hall Queen* (2000), *Then She Said It* (2003), *What Mama Said: an Epic Drama* (2004), and *No Vacancy* (2005). Tess Osonye Onwueme is the most decorated of all Nigerian female playwrights, winning major awards like “the prestigious Fonlon-Nichols award (2009), the Phyllis Wheatley/Nwapa award for outstanding black writers (2008).”<sup>255</sup> period She also won “the Martin Luther King, Jr./Caeser Chavez Distinguished Writers Award”<sup>256</sup>, among others. In 2007, she was appointed to the US State Department Public Diplomacy Specialist/Speaker Program for North, West, and East India. According to information on her website, Onwueme is currently a “Distinguished Professor of Cultural Diversity and English at the University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire”, a position she attained in 1994. Julie Okoh (1947- ) is the author of *Austerity, Mask* (1988), *Mary, Model for all Woman*, *The Mannequins* (1997), *In Search of Jesus*, *The Nativity, Edewede* (2000), *In the Fullness of Time* (2001), *Who can Fight the Gods?* (2002), *Aisha* (2005), and *Closed Doors* (2007). Okoh is a Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria.

Stella ‘Dia Oyedepo (1952- ) began writing with *Our Wife is not a Woman* (performed in 1979) and, since that first attempt has written and published many plays which include *The Greatest Gift* (1988), *Beyond the Dark Tunnel* (1992), *Don’t Believe What You See* (1994), *My Daughter is an Egg* (1997), *Doom in the Dimes* (1997), *A Play that was Never to be* (1998), *See!: A Play* (1997), *Alice, oh! Alice* (2000), *Brain has no Gender* (2001), *The Mad Doctor* (2001), *The Rebellion of the Bumpy-Chested* (2002), *On His Demise* (2002), *At the Devil’s Mercy* (2002), *The Dainty and the Dirty* (2004), *Blindfolded by Fate* (2004), *All for Nothing* (2006), *The Day of Woe* (2006), etc. She was the Director-General of Kwara State Cultural Centre, Nigeria for more that ten years. Other female playwrights include Irene Salami-Agunloye (1962- ) with *The Queen Sisters* (2001), *Emotan* (2001), *More Than Dancing* (2003), *Sweet Revenge* (2004), and *Idia: The Warrior Queen of Benin* (2009); Foluke Ogunleye (1962- ) with *The Innocent Victims and other Plays* (2003), *Nest in a*

*Cage* (1985), *The Broken Edge* (2002), and *Jabulile* (2005). The growing lists also include Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh (1966- ) with *A Night of a Thousand Truth, Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again, Cauldron of Death, Every day for the Thief, Who Owns the Coffin? Forest of Palmtrees, Nneora: an African Doll's House* and *Out of the Mask*; and Bunmi O. Julius-Adeoye (1973-2010) a promising and energetic playwright who passed away suddenly on May 16, 2010, after establishing her presence with plays like *Ajarat* (2006), *The Thorn* (2007), *War at Peace, I will be Dead by Tomorrow, Ibidunni-A Choreo-Musical Drama* (2007), *The Three wives* and *Atunto* (2009). These female playwrights have feminist philosophy permeating out of every fibre of their works. Nevertheless, their works also discuss the issue of survival like material emancipation, economic emancipation, political emancipation, educational emancipation, and so on.

Aside Ahmed Yerima, Ben Tomoloju, Sam Ukala, Chukwuma Okoye, Emeka Nwabueze who have distinguished themselves within this generation others such as Bakare Ojo Razak, Felix Okolo, Alex Asigbo, John Iwuh, Chris Egharevba, Greg Mbarjiorgu, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Lekan Balogun, Debo Sotuminu, Segun Ashade,<sup>1</sup> Makinde Adeniran, Akpos Adesi, Benedict Binebai, Victor Dugga, Solomon Igunare are fast making their impact felt on the Nigerian dramatic firmament.

Ahmed Yerima's theatrical creation includes: *The Silent God, The Bishop & the Soul with Thank you Lord, The Lottery Ticket, The Trial of Oba Ovonramwen, Kaffir's Last Game, Attahiru, The Sick People, The Sisters, Tafida, Dry Leaves on Ukan Trees, Yemoja, Otaelo, The Angel & Other Plays, The Lima and Ade Ire, Idemili, Hard ground, Ameh Oboni the Great, Erelu Kuti, The Wives, Aetu, Akuabata, Tuti, Mojagbe, The Ife Quartet, The Sacred Mortars, Mu'adhin's Call* and others published in a collection as well as those performed but yet to be published.

Ahmed Yerima and Tess Onwueme parade the definitive works for this generation dramatists who are bent on re-orientating the Nigerian society to take a new course in order to survive the harsh reality prevalent in the nation. However Emeka Nwabueze's with such dramatic creation as *The Guardian of the Cosmos, Spokesman of the Oracle, A Dance of the*

*Dead, Echoes of Madness, Parliament of Vultures* and *When the Arrows Rebound* (a dramatic adaptation of Chinua Achebe's *Arrows of God*) has his feet solidly rooted on the Nigerian stage. Biyi Bandele-Thomas' adaptation for the stage of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has made the play a favourite on both the Nigerian and Western stage just like Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame* before it. Ben Tomoloju's *Askari, Jankariwo* and *Iphigenia finds Aiyelala* have been staged both in Nigeria and some other parts of the world.

### **Nigerian Theatre in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century.**

The challenges and developmental issues that characterize Nigeria in the first decade of the new millennium are not different from those of the years before it. These issues remain corruption, gender-related problems, inadequacy of basic social amenities, insecurity and so on. However, these today's dramatists approach their writings from the purview of socio-political realism, by making representation of the social, cultural, economic and political reality in Nigeria in their works. The social and political reality of the twenty-first century Nigeria is among many reasons favourable to dramatic creation based on the fact that democracy seems to be taking a firm root in the country for the first time since political independence from Great Britain in 1960, in spite of the unchanging corrupt nature of the political elites. This is because Nigeria has witness transition from one civilian government to the other three times without interruption since 1999. Notable dramatists of this era are mostly those who were already well known before the end of the twentieth century, while the rest are those who were yet students of theatre in the 1990's. The crop of playwrights that emerged after year 2000, are like their predecessors in the sense that they are lecturers of theatre studies at university or in other institutions of higher learning. They also write in English language there limiting their patronage to those a segment of the society. However, due to the functional role of the theatre, some of the playwrights are able to secure some grants that enable them to develop indigenous language theatre performance that is geared towards solving community based issues. The problem with the Theatre for Development plays which are most often agitational in presentation is that they are often not published for and wider audience,

and even when they are, they are published in English language. The list of playwrights during this decade soars to a proportion that is difficult to follow and this is because they cover the whole landscape of Nigeria. Some of these playwrights are quick to publish the plays without first trying them out on the theatrical stage. However some of them like Ben Tomoloju and Makinde Adeniran put their plays up for performances without any recourse to textual publication.

Chukwuma Okoye produced large bodies of dramatic works which include *We the Best* (Winner of the 1993 Association of Nigerian authors Prize for Drama), *Poison*, and *Time* but had very few of them published. This makes it difficult to follow the volume of available dramatic materials and dramatists of the age. Another significant development that contributes to the increase in the number of playwrights and performances in the nation is the increase in the number of university and theatre arts departments. For example, the first decade of the twenty-first century boasts of over fifty universities and colleges of education offering theatre arts courses (Julius-Adeoye: 2013, 69).

The dramatists of this period follow the trend of writers of the last century (20th C.) by presenting dramatic texts constructed with Nigerian historical content, the country's civil war of 1967-1970, the incessant ethno-religious crises in the Northern part of the country, the militancy of the Niger Delta area and the nation's political upheavals. Feminist thought finds an outlet in the dramatic creation of some of these playwrights. Adaptation is also a ready material for dramatic creation of this age.

Onukaogu A. A and Onyerionwu E. (2009), draw a list of those dramatists of Eastern Nigerian extraction, which they both consider as prominent in the twenty-first century. Though the list is not comprehensive, however it captures to an extent some playwrights that are seemingly unknown in other parts of the country. The popularity of their plays is based on the acceptability of the performances by the audiences who saw and read the texts within the higher institutions. The analyses of the chosen dramatic text done by these duo are eye opening and incisive. Onukaogu and Onyerionwu list the playwrights to include "Tess Onwueme, Emeka Nwabueze, Effiong Johnson, Chris Anyokwu, John Iwuh, Onyebushi Nwosu, Chris Ngozi Okoro, Chukwuma Anyawu, Austin E. Anigala, Ebereonwu, Hope

Eghagha, Helon Habila and Julie Okoh.”(175). The few non-Igbo playwrights mentioned in the book are Femi Osofisan, Olu Obafemi, Niyi Osundare, Ahmed Yerima, Bakare-Ojo Rasaki and Isiaka Aliagan. However by excluding dramatists like Ben Tomoloju, Sam Ukala, Chukwuma Okoye, Tracie Uto-Ezeajugh, Bunmi Julius-Adeoye, Irene Salami-Agunloye, Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Lekan Balogun, Debo Sotuminu, Segun Ashade, Muritala Sule, Makinde Adeniran, Akpos Adesi, Benedict Binebai including Wole Oguntokun, all who have distinguished themselves within this generation of playwrights from their lists is a big shortcoming on such a beautiful critical volume. Names like Helon Habila a renowned poet and John Iwuh have just a single published and un-staged play each to their names when Onukaogu and Onyerionwu published their book. Helon Habila’s “The Trials of Ken Saro Wiwa” appeared as the only play in *Camouflage: Best of Contemporary Writing from Nigeria* (2009). However, most of the playwrights not mentioned have had their plays performed in many parts of the country both as published texts and manuscripts.

The thematic preoccupations of many of the plays published by Nigerian playwrights in the first decade of the twenty-first century reveal the sociopolitical, socioeconomic and sociocultural situation of the Nigerian nation of the period. For example, Julie Okoh uses *Who Can Fight the Gods?* (2002), to make poignant comments on the social vices, such as cultism, misappropriation of funds, and other social vices. In Edewede (2000), Okoh focuses on ways of changing the traditionally held perception of the advantage of female circumcision by raising awareness on the medical and social problems that follow the victims of the practice. Onukaogu and Onyerionwu consider *Who Can Fight the Gods?* as “a satire of contemporary Nigerian campus realities” (191). Chris Anyokwu’s *Ufuoma* (2007) and Bakare-Ojo Rasaki’s *Once Upon a Tower* (2000) also take swipes at the Nigerian contemporary realities, especially the institutions of higher learning. Both plays dramatize the rampant corruption within the institutions, cultism, power politics, sex and money related exploitations.<sup>2</sup> John Iwuh’s *The Village Lamb* (2007) and the sequel *Spellbound* (2009) take a swipe at the penchant for double standard and hypocritical nature of most African Christians. More often when the adherents of the Christian



faith are called the people rush forward to proclaim their freedom and equality in Christ Jesus, however when the issue of traditional taboo is raised the same people are quick to point out those of lowly birth. In both plays the Osu caste of the Igbos becomes the thrust for the dramatic plots. Separation must be drawn between those of free birth and those belonging to the traditional gods of the people. According to John Iwuh “despite the proclamation of Christianity by the people it is difficult for non-Osu ‘born again’ Christians to contract marriage with an Osu even though of the same faith.”<sup>3</sup> Bunmi Julius-Adeoye’s *Atunto* employs metaphor in its treatment of the Nigerian corruption laden and immoral society. Debo Sotiminu’s psychoanalytical play *Onion’s Skin* and Lekan Balogun’s *Moremi Ajansoro* are positive exploration in dramatic creation.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has drawn a link between the earlier two generations of Nigerian dramatists and the present which Ahmed Yerima and Tess Onwueme represent. The link is well-defined in the line of thematic preoccupation in the dramas of the notable playwrights of generations mentioned but markedly different in style of presentation. The generational classification often observed among these dramatists is basically in the area of ideological commitment and writing style.

Ademiju-Bepo (2007) highlights that to the third generation playwrights, radical “ideologies have failed to awaken the desired consciousness in the people to confront their realities.” Even when these themes are treated through traditional plays, they are most often directed at the Nigerian masses. The masses are expected to distinguish between the oppressive and dictatorial governance of most of the leaders depicted in the plays in relation to what obtains in their everyday lives and the struggle for survival.

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**(Footnotes)**

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