A Comparative Study of Feminist Themes in Femi Osifisan's *Women of Owu* and Julie Okoh's *Itohan*

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Abstract

This paper explores the manifestation of feminist themes in Nigerian drama, with a focus on Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* and Julie Okoh's *Itohan*. Through a qualitative analysis of the plays, the article examines how the playwrights depict gender inequality, female oppression, and resistance to patriarchy, and interprets the implications for feminist advocacy in Nigeria. Employing African Feminist Theory, particularly Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism, the study reveals that both plays dramatize women's struggles within patriarchal societies, albeit from distinct perspectives. Osofisan's work presents women as victims of war and moral agents preserving communal memory, while Okoh's play foregrounds female resistance against oppressive cultural practices. The study concludes that Nigerian drama serves as a medium of cultural critique and feminist advocacy, challenging oppressive traditions and promoting female agency.

Keywords: Feminist themes, Nigerian drama, Gender inequality, Patriarchy, African Feminist Theory, Female agency

Introduction

The portrayal of women in Nigerian literature, particularly in the dramatic works of Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* and Julie Okoh's *Itohan*, serve as a model exemplification of the complex and multifaceted nature of feminist discourse in Africa. These plays offer a unique exploration of the ways in which African women navigate patriarchal norms, social hierarchies, and historical realities that influence their opportunities, responsibilities, and vulnerabilities. The historical context of Nigerian feminist activism, dating back to the early 20th century with pioneers such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, provides a rich backdrop for understanding the evolution of feminist thought in Nigeria. The establishment of the Nigerian Women's Union in 1944 marked a critical moment in the history of Nigerian feminism, as it focused on improving women's socio-political status and fighting colonial injustices.

The portrayal of women in Nigerian literature has undergone a significant transformation over time, reflecting the changing socio-political landscape. Authors such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have been instrumental in reshaping the Nigerian literary landscape, foregrounding women's voices, and illuminating gender-based injustices. Their works have served as a powerful medium for challenging patriarchal structures, advocating for gender equity, and celebrating women's resilience and agency. This article explores feminist themes and female representation in Nigerian drama, using *Women of Owu* and *Itohan* as case studies. Through a comparative analysis of these texts, the research investigates how feminist ideologies are dramatized and how female characters negotiate power, identity, and resistance within the socio-cultural contexts depicted. The study highlights the ways in which Nigerian playwrights employ drama as a tool for social critique and transformation, mirroring the lived experiences of women and fostering critical discourse and advocacy.

Nigerian society remains predominantly patriarchal, with entrenched cultural and traditional beliefs that prioritize male dominance and authority. Women are often confined to roles as caregivers and subordinates, with limited visibility, autonomy, and access to decision-making platforms. These traditional narratives reinforce gender stereotypes that portray women as passive, submissive, or

dependent on male counterparts. The paper underscores the need for a critical reevaluation of cultural norms and practices, highlighting the tension between inherited traditions and contemporary ideas of human rights, individual liberty, and gender equality. The challenges confronting feminism in Nigeria are multifaceted and far-reaching. Economic inequality, political and social underrepresentation, and the intersection of ethnicity, region, religion, and socio-economic status all contribute to the marginalization of women. Despite these challenges, drama emerges as a powerful tool for social critique and transformation, mirroring the lived experiences of women and fostering critical discourse and advocacy.

Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing academic conversations on the role of drama in interrogating gender roles and advocating for women's rights, emphasizing the importance of female representation in Nigerian theatre and promoting a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the preservation and academic appreciation of the works of Femi Osofisan and Julie Okoh, enhancing the visibility of their contributions to Nigerian dramatic literature and encouraging further scholarship on their thematic and stylistic innovations. The research focuses on the representation of feminist themes in *Women of Owu* and *Itohan* provides valuable insights into the ways Nigerian drama engages with feminist themes and contributes meaningfully to ongoing conversations in literature, gender studies, and theatre. The limitations of this paper include its confinement to only two dramatic texts, the reliance on interpretive and qualitative methods, and the potential lack of transnational applicability. However, the study provides a critical resource for students, scholars, and practitioners in Theatre Arts, Literary Studies, and Gender Studies, fostering a deeper understanding of how feminist theories are interpreted and dramatized in Nigerian literary discourse. This study highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of feminist discourse in Africa, recognizing the diversity of women's experiences and the importance of intersectionality in feminist thought. The study underscores the importance of promoting a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism, one that recognizes the agency and autonomy of African women and challenges the dominant narratives of patriarchal power.

This paper offers a profound exploration of the complex interplay between patriarchal structures and female agency in Nigerian drama, highlighting the enduring capacity of women to resist, subvert, and transcend the constraints of patriarchal power. The study serves as a powerful contribution to the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the importance of feminist resistance in challenging systemic oppression

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the African Feminism Theory, as articulated by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, to examine the portrayal of gender dynamics and women's experiences in Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* and Julie Okoh's *Itohan*. Ogundipe-Leslie's framework is rooted in the lived experiences of African women, responding to the unique interplay of indigenous patriarchy, colonial legacies, socio-economic structures, and cultural identities. Her approach provides a culturally situated understanding of feminism, distinct from dominant Western feminist paradigms, which often fail to consider the specific historical and cultural experiences of African women.

As Ogundipe-Leslie (2009) clarifies, feminism in the African context is often misunderstood or vilified, portrayed as an affront to tradition and family values. She asserts that feminism, particularly in African discourse, must be understood as a liberating framework that seeks to address women's oppression within cultural and societal systems, without being anti-men or anti-African: "Feminism is not a cry for any one kind of sexual orientation...it is not the reversal of roles.... It is not penis envy or gender envy: wanting to be a man as they like to say to us...it is not necessarily oppositional to men...not dividing the genders...it is not patriotism of Western women rhetoric... it is not opposed to African culture and heritage...it is not a choice between extreme patriarchy on the one hand or hateful separatism from men on the other" (p. 113).

This clarification is significant in the African context, where feminism is often misconstrued as a Western import, incompatible with local traditions and values. Ogundipe-Leslie's work underscores the importance of contextualizing feminist discourse within the specific historical and cultural experiences of African women,

recognizing the agency and autonomy of African women in the face of patriarchal power structures. The African Feminism Theory, as conceptualized by Ogundipe-Leslie, emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, recognizing that women's experiences are shaped by multiple and intersecting systems of oppression, including patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. This approach allows for a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which Nigerian playwrights portray women's experiences, highlighting the complex interplay between tradition, culture, and modernity.

This paper considers Womanism and Postcolonial Feminist Theory as supporting theoretical positions to enrich the analysis, recognizing the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as race, class, tradition, and colonial legacies (Coetzee, 2017). Womanism, as a theoretical framework, emphasizes the importance of considering the experiences of women of color, recognizing the ways in which racism and sexism intersect to shape women's lives. Postcolonial Feminist Theory, on the other hand, highlights the ways in which colonialism and imperialism have shaped the experiences of women in the Global South, recognizing the importance of decolonizing feminist discourse.

By adopting African Feminism as the foundational lens, this research aims to provide a great understanding of the ways in which Nigerian drama engages with feminist themes, highlighting the agency and autonomy of African women in the face of patriarchal power structures. The study examines how Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* and Julie Okoh's *Itohan* portray women's experiences, highlighting the ways in which women navigate and resist patriarchal norms, and assert their agency and autonomy in the face of oppression. Ultimately, this article tends to contributes to ongoing academic conversations on the role of drama in interrogating gender roles and advocating for women's rights, emphasizing the importance of female representation in Nigerian theatre and promoting a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism. The study underscores the importance of contextualizing feminist discourse within the specific historical and cultural experiences of African women, recognizing the agency and autonomy of African women in the face of patriarchal power structures.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of promoting a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism, one that recognizes the diversity of women's experiences and the ways in which multiple systems of oppression intersect to shape women's lives. By centering the experiences of African women, this study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of feminist discourse, one that is grounded in the specific historical and cultural experiences of African women. This study offers a profound exploration of the complex interplay between patriarchal structures and female agency in Nigerian drama, highlighting the enduring capacity of women to resist, subvert, and transcend the constraints of patriarchal power. The study serves as a powerful testament to the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the importance of feminist resistance in challenging systemic oppression.

Moreover, this paper underscores the need for a critical reevaluation of cultural norms and practices, highlighting the tension between inherited traditions and contemporary ideas of human rights, individual liberty, and gender equality. By situating women at the center of their narratives, Osofisan and Okoh offer a nuanced and complex portrayal of female agency and resilience in the face of oppression, challenging dominant discourses of power and privilege. Ultimately, the portrayal of women in *Women of Owu* and *Itohan* serves as a reminder of the importance of feminist resistance in challenging systemic oppression and promoting social change. It intends to highlight the importance of promoting a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism, one that recognizes the diversity of women's experiences and the ways in which multiple systems of oppression intersect to shape women's lives.

African Feminism / Womanism

African Feminism and Womanism are theoretical perspectives that emerge from the need to contextualize the struggles and experiences of African women, which are often misrepresented or overlooked in Western feminist discourses. These frameworks prioritize the specific socio-cultural and historical realities of African societies, recognizing that gender issues in Africa are inextricably linked to colonial history, economic inequality, traditional roles, and community survival (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 377). African Feminism emphasizes the multi-layered oppression faced by African women, shaped by patriarchy, class, race, colonial

legacies, and cultural expectations. This perspective moves beyond the binary of male oppressor versus female victim, interrogating broader power structures within African contexts. Womanism, as articulated by African theorists like Chikwenye Ogunyemi, underscores the complementary relationship between men and women, focusing on family cohesion, motherhood, communal values, and cultural identity. Ogunyemi (1985) argues that African Womanism "concerns itself as much with the black man as with the black woman," emphasizing racial and cultural survival as part of feminist advocacy (p. 72).

In Nigerian literary and dramatic traditions, African Feminism and Womanism provide grounded frameworks for interpreting female agency and resistance. Playwrights like Julie Okoh and Femi Osofisan craft female characters who advance oppressive systems without rejecting cultural values. These characters embody the womanist concern with rehabilitation and social re-integration, rather than revenge or alienation. The emphasis on inclusivity and pragmatism in African Feminism and Womanism encourages collaboration between men and women to dismantle harmful structures. This approach is reflected in the works of Osofisan and Okoh, which critique societal structures that normalize violence and exploitation, rather than framing men as natural enemies. Nnaemeka's concept of nego-feminism, a negotiation-based feminism that privileges compromise, coexistence, and strategic resistance, is particularly resonant in African settings (2004, p. 378). African Feminism and Womanism reject the assumption that tradition is inherently oppressive, seeking to reinterpret cultural practices in ways that affirm women's agency while preserving communal identity. This dynamic interplay between critique and cultural fidelity exemplifies how African Feminism operates with a dual commitment to change and continuity. African Feminism and Womanism offer a deeply contextualized, culturally relevant framework for analyzing feminist themes in Nigerian drama. These theories provide critical lenses through which scholars can interpret the experiences of women characters, recognizing their agency, culture, trauma, and identity. As such, African Feminism and Womanism are not only suitable but necessary for engaging with feminist narratives in Nigerian theatre.

Postcolonial Feminist Theory

Postcolonial Feminist Theory offers a critical framework for understanding the complex intersections of gender, race, class, and colonial history, particularly in formerly colonized societies. It emerged from both the feminist movement and postcolonial theory, challenging the universalist assumptions of Western feminism while also critiquing the gender-blind tendencies of early postcolonial studies. Postcolonial feminists argue that women in postcolonial contexts face multiple layers of oppression, not just from patriarchal structures, but also from the lingering effects of colonial domination and global capitalism. Scholars such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) and Gayatri Spivak (1999) have insisted that African, Asian, and Caribbean women should not be subsumed under a single global feminist narrative that ignores their specific cultural and historical experiences. In this regard, postcolonial feminism demands an approach that is grounded in the socio-political realities of women in the Global South, thereby recognizing how colonial legacies have shaped gender roles, power relations, and access to resources (Mohanty, 2003, p. 39).

In the Nigerian context, Postcolonial Feminist Theory becomes highly relevant in interpreting feminist expressions in drama and literature. Nigerian women writers and playwrights often use their works to respond to the residues of colonial power dynamics that continue to influence gender relations. Within this framework, a play like *Itohan* by Julie Okoh examines not only the subjugation of women but also the socio-political hierarchies inherited from Nigeria's colonial past. The female characters in such texts are shaped by both indigenous patriarchal systems and foreign ideological impositions, including Victorian ideals of womanhood introduced during colonization. Postcolonial feminism, therefore, enables the researcher to interrogate how cultural narratives in drama reflect the burdens placed on women by these dual systems of control. The theory is particularly useful in exploring how female characters negotiate identity, agency, and resistance in a society still grappling with its colonial aftermath (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 378).

Concept of Feminism

Feminism is widely understood as the advocacy for equal rights and opportunities between men and women across social, economic, and political domains. It

challenges patriarchal systems that perpetuate male dominance and seeks to dismantle institutional structures that uphold gender-based oppression. As both a socio-political movement and theoretical framework, feminism underscores the constructed nature of gender roles, which are shaped more by cultural norms than biology (Shaw & Lee, 2007, p. 214). According to Shaw and Lee (2007):

> Gender… can be understood as the social organization of sexual difference. Although biological distinctions create female and male humans, society interprets these differences and gives us "feminine" and "masculine" people. These adjectives are intentionally placed in quotation marks to emphasize that notions of femininity and masculinity are socially constructed - created by social processes that reflect the various workings of power in society. Therefore, these notions are culturally and historically changeable. (p. 214)

Thereafter, gender began to be viewed as an area that has wider connotation than was originally thought of. People began to reason why human beings behave the way they do, whether their actions were as a result of their biological sex or not. One of the widely accepted definitions comes from bell hooks, who asserts that "feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (hooks, 2000, p. 1). This definition moves beyond simple gender equality and recognizes the structural roots of sexism and patriarchy. hooks also acknowledges that feminism must remain open to different interpretations, especially across racial and cultural lines, and should not alienate male allies but engage them in the pursuit of justice. According to Utoh-Ezeajugh (2011), feminism in African literary discourse emerges from a sustained agitation against the subjugation of women in a male-dominated society. She notes that it has taken various ideological forms such as femalism, womanism, motherism, black feminism, and humanism, all aimed at empowering women and redefining their roles. As Utoh-Ezeajugh (2011) observes:

> Feminist postulations hinging on varied ideological conceptions have been espoused by scholars concerned with the empowerment, self-actualization and self-reclamation of the woman in a male-dominated world. From feminism to femalism, to womanism, to motherism, to black feminism, and humanism, the subjugation of women has taken centre space in literary discourse on gender interactions (p. 95).

This multi-dimensionality of feminism indicates its adaptability across cultural and historical contexts, particularly in postcolonial African societies. Historically, feminism as a formal ideology is traced to thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *Vindication of the Rights of Women* laid foundational ideas for gender equality. However, other scholars credit Christine de Pizan for her medieval writings on women's rights, indicating that feminist thought existed long before its modern articulation (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2011, p.95).

The social construction of gender is central to feminist discourse. Feminists assert that the categorization of roles based on biological sex is a patriarchal invention meant to reinforce male dominance. Galdas and Johnson (2011) observe that societies interpret biological differences to define acceptable behaviour and determine access to resources, rights, and power. This cultural encoding of gender roles disadvantages women by limiting their access to opportunities and reinforcing stereotypes. Some feminists, such as Bakare-Yusuf, Nicholas, and Steady, argue that women are equal to or even more capable than men, but social roles imposed by society prevent them from realizing their full potential (as cited in *Gender, Female Today*, 2021). These roles are not universal but vary across societies, yet they are consistently constructed to favour men.

Feminism therefore seeks to question and reform these roles. According to Warnecke (2011), although gender norms differ from society to society, they often create imbalances that privilege men. Sheffield (1999) notes that women are frequently relegated to tedious, low-paying jobs, while men dominate lucrative and prestigious professions, further perpetuating gender inequality. Feminist theorists such as Gayle Austin emphasize the role of literature and theatre in this struggle, arguing that female writers often encode resistance in their works. Austin (1990) identifies various stages of feminist literary criticism, from the depiction of female suffering in male-authored works to deeper theoretical examinations of language and narrative strategies used by women to articulate resistance.

In the Nigerian context, feminism has had to evolve within the challenges of cultural and religious conservatism. This has led to the emergence of uniquely African feminist theories like womanism (coined by Alice Walker) and motherism (proposed by Catherine Acholonu), both of which emphasize reconciliation,

complementarity, and cultural specificity. These theories advocate a more moderate and culturally grounded approach to feminism, avoiding the radical tone often associated with Western feminist models (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2011, p.95). According to Wangui Stuhlhofer (2020), African feminism is best understood as a collective of intersecting strands, each responding to specific historical and cultural realities. It does not seek to replicate Western feminist narratives but to address the tangible and context-specific challenges African women face. These include poverty, illiteracy, early marriage, and limited access to land and education (Mokua, 2013; Syomwene & Kindiki, 2015).

The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF, 2019) highlights this multiplicity by stating:

> We have multiple and varied identities as African Feminists… Our current struggles as African Feminists are inextricably linked to our past as a continent, diverse pre-colonial contexts, slavery, colonization, liberation struggles, neocolonialism, globalization, etc." (p. 135)

Wangari Maathai's brand of feminism, as explored by Stuhlhofer (2020), exemplifies ecofeminism, a strand of feminism that links environmental degradation to patriarchal and colonial exploitation. Maathai's activism for environmental conservation, women's empowerment, and democratic justice demonstrates how African feminism integrates environmental justice and social equity without alienating cultural values. Maathai (2006) describes her feminism as grounded in nature, justice, and communal well-being, rather than confrontational gender dualism. She challenged both male-dominated institutions and cultural expectations without rejecting the value of family and tradition. Her work illustrates the complex interplay between gender, colonial history, environmental sustainability, and cultural identity.

Feminism and Gender in African Literature

Feminism in African literature has taken on a distinctive voice that departs from Western feminist narratives to reflect the unique historical, cultural, and social conditions of African women. The intersection of gender roles, colonial histories, and indigenous patriarchy has necessitated a literature that interrogates both traditional and modern gendered experiences. African feminist writers often seek

to critique both the oppressive norms of African patriarchy and the limitations of Western feminist theories that fail to recognize African contexts. In many literary works, women are not just victims of male dominance, but agents of resistance who question, subvert, or negotiate cultural systems that marginalize them. This positioning is crucial in works like Julie Okoh's *Itohan* and Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*, where female characters confront structural inequalities and redefine their identities through agency and resistance. These narratives often challenge stereotypes by presenting multifaceted portrayals of African women who navigate the dual burdens of tradition and modernity (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 41).

Gender in African literature has never been treated as a mere biological category, but as a complex social construct shaped by power relations, cultural myths, and institutional norms. The literary representation of gender often mirrors societal transformations and disruptions, especially in postcolonial societies grappling with redefining identity. For instance, the depiction of women in post-independence literature often oscillates between reverence and repression—celebrated as custodians of tradition or vilified as threats to male authority. In Osofisan's *Women of Owu*, gender and war intersect as the women struggle not just for survival but for voice, justice, and remembrance in a male-dominated historical narrative. Similarly, in *Itohan*, Julie Okoh dissects the structural injustices that push young girls into trafficking and sexual exploitation, raising gendered questions about value, autonomy, and moral hypocrisy in society. Literature thus becomes a political space for challenging male-centric narratives and advocating for inclusive representations (Amadiume, 1997, p. 96).

Women in Nigerian Drama and Theatre

Women in Nigerian drama and theatre occupy a pivotal yet often contested space, reflecting the evolving discourse around gender, power, and cultural expression. Historically, female characters were largely constructed through patriarchal lenses, often cast in roles that reinforced societal expectations, such as caregivers, subordinates, temptresses, or victims. These depictions stemmed partly from traditional dramatic forms and partly from colonial-influenced literary styles that prioritized male heroism. However, with the rise of feminist consciousness and increased female participation in theatrical production, a more nuanced representation of women began to emerge. Contemporary Nigerian drama

challenges the marginalization of female characters by foregrounding women's experiences, struggles, and agency. In plays by dramatists such as Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, and Irene Salami-Agunloye, women are depicted not merely as appendages to male narratives but as central figures confronting oppressive systems and advocating for transformation (Onwueme, 2000, p. 112).

Furthermore, Nigerian theatre has increasingly served as a platform for women to voice resistance and engage with socio-political issues. Theatrical narratives like Julie Okoh's *Edewede* and Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* spotlight female protagonists who disrupt gender hierarchies and challenge patriarchal traditions. These plays explore critical themes such as widowhood practices, child marriage, gender-based violence, and female education—issues that directly affect women lived realities. In *Edewede*, Okoh critiques societal complicity in women's oppression through a dramatic exposition of harmful cultural rites, while *The Reign of Wazobia* envisions a utopian space governed by a female leader who rewrites patriarchal laws. These texts demonstrate that Nigerian drama has become a potent tool for feminist discourse, allowing women to symbolically and literally reclaim public and performative space (Salami-Agunloye, 1996, p. 27). Such representations affirm the theatre's capacity to interrogate and transform social values.

Feminist Themes in Contemporary Nigerian Plays

Contemporary Nigerian plays have increasingly embraced feminist themes as a means of challenging entrenched patriarchal ideologies and promoting gender justice. These plays articulate women lived experiences and interrogate social structures that legitimize inequality. Feminist themes such as gender discrimination, reproductive autonomy, domestic violence, economic marginalization, and the silencing of female voices are foregrounded through compelling narratives and character development. Writers such as Tess Onwueme, Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, and Irene Salami-Agunloye use drama as a tool of socio-political critique, constructing female characters who defy oppression and assert their identities. For instance, Onwueme's *Then She Said It* presents a woman's journey through silence, suffering, and ultimately self-expression, reflecting feminist emphasis on voice and agency (Onwueme, 2002, p. 47). These

feminist themes provide audiences with reflective and transformative encounters that question the status quo.

Moreover, feminist Nigerian drama resists the cultural essentialism that often confines women to domesticity or symbolic motherhood. Instead, playwrights depict women who embody strength, leadership, and activism. In Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House*, the central character challenges the patriarchal institutions of marriage and tradition, echoing Ibsen's *A Doll's House* but within a postcolonial Nigerian context. Through this adaptation, the playwright reclaims feminist discourse for African realities, emphasizing indigenous forms of resistance and autonomy. Such plays reveal how feminist ideology is not foreign to African culture but resonates with indigenous struggles for equity and communal justice. Feminist themes in these texts are thus both globally conscious and locally grounded, offering hybrid narratives that merge African identity with universal gender concerns (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2005, p. 93).

In addition, contemporary Nigerian plays often adopt performative strategies that amplify feminist concerns through symbolism, satire, and communal storytelling. Irene Salami-Agunloye's *Emotan* integrates historical figures and traditional performance aesthetics to celebrate female heroism and collective resistance. This dramatization of real-life women who shaped history underscores the feminist project of recuperating forgotten narratives and re-inscribing them into national consciousness. The deployment of women's bodies, voices, and memories as instruments of storytelling further affirms the feminist principle that "the personal is political." These thematic explorations have enriched the content and form of Nigerian drama, ensuring that feminist perspectives remain central to the theatrical conversation. The result is a growing corpus of plays that not only reflect women's struggles but also imagine alternative futures grounded in gender justice and social equality (Salami-Agunloye, 2008, p. 214).

Representation of Women in *Women of Owu* and *Itohan*

The representation of women in *Women of Owu* by Femi Osofisan and *Itohan* by Irene Salami-Agunloye offers critical insights into how female experiences are narrated, historicized, and politicized in Nigerian drama. In *Women of Owu*, Osofisan adapts Euripides' *The Trojan Women* into an African context, portraying

the post-war trauma of women whose lives have been shattered by the invasion of their city. The play foregrounds grief, dislocation, and the silencing of women in the face of militarized patriarchy. Although the characters are initially presented as victims, Osofisan uses their suffering as a medium for social commentary on powerlessness and resistance. The women, led by Erelu Afin and the Queen, embody sorrow and resilience, mourning their dead while also interrogating the moral failures of both conquerors and their own leaders (Osofisan, 2006, p. 56). Their voices become symbolic instruments through which suppressed histories are reclaimed and retold.

In contrast, Salami-Agunloye's *Itohan* presents a more contemporary and localized depiction of women's struggles, especially regarding human trafficking, prostitution, and economic exploitation. The titular character, Itohan, becomes a tragic emblem of the desperation that pushes many young Nigerian women into dangerous migratory paths. Through Itohan's personal journey—from rural hardship to urban deception and transnational exploitation—the play explores how systemic poverty, patriarchal pressure, and gendered expectations contribute to women's vulnerability. Unlike the mythic and collective lamentation in *Women of Owu*, *Itohan* focuses on the personal dimension of gendered suffering and how individual women confront betrayal from both male and female actors in society. Salami-Agunloye's representation is explicitly feminist, shedding light on the global commodification of African female bodies and critiquing both local complicity and international exploitation (Salami-Agunloye, 2006, p. 81).

Both plays present women not merely as victims but also as moral commentators and agents of reflection. In *Women of Owu*, the female characters engage in philosophical dialogues about justice, vengeance, and the failure of leadership, positioning them as intellectual voices within the narrative. In *Itohan*, the protagonist's story is framed not just as tragedy, but as a warning and a call for collective responsibility. The use of memory, chorus, and direct audience address in both plays enhances the participatory dimension of women's representation. These stylistic devices align with feminist dramaturgy, which seeks to foreground female experience, dismantle linear narratives, and disrupt the conventional male gaze. Ultimately, both Osofisan and Salami-Agunloye craft layered representations that move beyond stereotype, offering complex portrayals of

Nigerian women as thinkers, mourners, victims, and resistors in a society shaped by conflict and inequality (Egya, 2011, p. 112).

Feminist Themes in Nigerian Literature

The colonial and postcolonial experiences have precipitated a profound exacerbation of gender inequalities, as the imposition of Eurocentric patriarchal models has supplanted indigenous systems wherein women previously held socio-economic power, thereby effecting a paradigmatic shift in the dynamics of power and relegating women to the periphery of societal influence (Omonubi-McDonnell, 2003, p. 100; Okoh, 2002, p. 31). This disruption is starkly reflected in the dramaturgical representations of female characters, who are frequently relegated to the status of relics of a bygone cultural order, their voices and agency systematically elided and erased, thus perpetuating the hegemonic narratives of patriarchal dominance.

Feminism in Nigerian drama, therefore, emerges as a multifaceted and multivalent discourse, functioning simultaneously as a method of critique and a tool of reconstruction, with the ultimate aim of dismantling the entrenched stereotypes and expanding the scope of representation for women, thereby challenging the insidious legacies of colonialism and tradition (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 48). By reimagining the stage and reinscribing female narratives, feminist playwrights contribute to the broader societal efforts toward achieving gender equity and precipitating cultural transformation, thus participating in the ongoing project of decolonizing the mind and reconstituting the cultural imaginary (Kolawole, 1997, p. 93).

Again, the feminist project in Nigerian drama is characterized by a distinct and contextualized understanding of the intersections between patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism, recognizing that women's experiences are shaped by multiple and often conflicting systems of oppression (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 71). This recognition informs the deployment of a range of dramatic strategies and techniques, including the subversion of traditional narrative structures, the reappropriation of myth and symbolism, and the creation of female-centric narratives that challenge the dominant discourses of power and privilege (Azuike, 2003, p. 27).

Ultimately, the feminist critique in Nigerian drama offers a profound challenge to the hegemonic narratives of power and identity, providing a platform for marginalized voices to be heard and for alternative narratives to be articulated, thereby contributing to the ongoing project of cultural transformation and social justice.

Comparative Feminist Studies in African Drama

Comparative feminist studies in African drama provides the lens for exploring women's experiences across cultural, national, and ideological boundaries. Scholars examine how playwrights like Femi Osofisan and Julie Okoh dramatize themes such as patriarchy, motherhood, and political marginalization, revealing stark differences in ideological approaches to women's suffering and empowerment. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994, p. 48) notes that these studies contextualize African women's struggles within global feminist discourse while retaining socio-cultural peculiarities.

The interplay between traditional African values and Western feminist principles is a key aspect of comparative analysis. Ogunyemi (1985, p. 71) highlights that African feminism emphasizes resilience and transformation, as seen in *Women of Owu* and *Itohan*. The plays differ in period and tone, yet share a commitment to unveiling female existence in patriarchal societies.

Language and characterization serve as critical points of comparison, with female collectives strengthening communal voices (Azuike, 2003, p. 27). Kolawole (1997, p. 93) opines that these plays challenge colonial and local structures of domination, affirming women's capacity for renewal, justice, and transformation. Comparative feminist discourse enhances pedagogical and activist frameworks, providing insights into African women's experiences and artistic responses to gender inequity.

Previous Studies on *Women of Owu*

Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*, an adaptation of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, has garnered significant scholarly attention for its portrayal of war, trauma, and gendered suffering. The play reinterprets the 19th-century Owu War through a feminist lens, centering female voices often excluded from traditional war

narratives. Utoh-Ezeajugh (2009, p. 35) argues that Osofisan's adaptation provides a postcolonial feminist perspective, allowing female characters to narrate their pain, protest, and displacement. Erelu Afin and the women chorus embody resistance against patriarchal oppression and military violence, confronting their condition with profound moral authority (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2009, p. 35).

The play critiques the gendered impacts of war, framing it within post-war trauma and collective memory (Oha, 2012, p. 56). Osofisan employs Yoruba rituals, communal mourning, and traditional chants to reclaim African cultural aesthetics, reinforcing the authenticity of women's lamentations (Ezenwanebe, 2014, p. 91). The play serves as a vehicle for political engagement, dramatizing the cyclical nature of violence and the complicity of colonial and indigenous male elites (Onukaogu and Asein, 2011, p. 112).

Erelu Afin stands out as a moral conscience, condemning both invaders and her own people for failing to protect the vulnerable. Performance analyses highlight the play's feminist message, with directors' choices intensifying the emotional impact (Obafemi, 2010, p. 44). *Women of Owu* has emerged as a foundational text in African feminist theatre, demonstrating the intersection of classical adaptation, African aesthetics, and gender politics to critique historical injustices.

Previous Studies on *Itohan*

Julie Okoh's *Itohan* constitutes a touching critique of the entrenched patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender-based violence and enforced silence surrounding the exploitation of women in Nigerian society. Scholarly discourse has extensively interrogated the play's unflinching portrayal of these themes, situating it within the broader corpus of African feminist drama. Nwankwo (2018) astutely observes that *Itohan* exemplifies how traditional societies condition women to accept abuse as a normative aspect of their existence, thereby underscoring the complicity of communal structures in reinforcing these injustices (p. 112). The eponymous character, Itohan, emerges as a paradigmatic representation of Nigerian women whose agency is circumscribed by societal expectations and familial pressures.

Ezeigbo (2017) posits that *Itohan* diverges from earlier representations of docile female characters, instead presenting a protagonist who seeks justice in the face of overwhelming adversity (p. 89). This narrative trajectory underscores the play's engagement with the lived realities of Nigerian women, highlighting the intersections of gender violence and legal-cultural frameworks. Azuike (2020) further elucidates that the play critiques the family's role in perpetuating violence, often prioritizing collective image over individual trauma (p. 54).

Okoh's masterful deployment of theatrical devices, including repetition, monologues, and stark language, serves to reinforce the protagonist's psychological torment. Ogunyemi (2019) notes that stage adaptations of _Itohan_ utilize direct address and stylized movement to immerse audiences in the character's experience, transforming the theatre space into a site of empathy and advocacy (p. 71). This aesthetic dimension has invited comparisons with other feminist plays that employ similar modes of delivery to provoke social reflection.

In conclusion, *Itohan* stands as a landmark text in Nigerian feminist theatre, contributing significantly to discourse on gender inequality and resistance. Its candid portrayal of the scars borne by victims of sexual violence, and the complicity of culture, religion, and tradition in enabling such acts, solidifies Okoh's position as a writer committed to justice and social change.

Synopsis of *Women of Owu*

Women of Owu explores the aftermath of the devastating Owu War, where the city of Owu is sacked by allied forces. Through the lens of its female characters, the play critiques the consequences of war, particularly on women, and highlights their resilience and moral agency. Divine and human narratives intertwine, revealing the complexities of conflict, memory, and survival. Osofisan's work underscores the enduring human spirit, positioning women as bearers of memory, conscience, and catalysts for social transformation.

Synopsis of *Itohan the Betrothed*

Itohan the Betrothed explores the complexities of tradition, identity, and personal agency through the story of Itohan, a woman caught in the web of a centuries-old betrothal custom. The play delves into the tensions between individual desire and

societal expectations, as Itohan's life is shaped by her childhood betrothal to the wealthy and influential Okharedia Arebamhen. Through a non-linear narrative, the play reveals the traumatic consequences of this tradition, including violence, displacement, and the commodification of women. As the story unfolds, characters grapple with the need to reform oppressive customs, ultimately leading to a hopeful resolution that affirms the power of personal identity and agency

Commentary on War and Its Consequences:
Itohan's declaration, "I can't honor injustice; I obeyed my natural instincts" (p. 24), constitutes a paradigmatic exemplification of feminist tenets, foregrounding the interrelated themes of autonomy, moral courage, and resistance to patriarchal control. By explicitly challenging the entrenched gendered expectation that daughters must unquestioningly obey their fathers, Itohan asserts a profound claim to self-determination, thereby subverting the dominant narrative of patriarchal authority.

This assertion is underpinned by a liberal feminist perspective, which emphasizes the imperative of recognizing women's individual rights and autonomy, as well as the need to reform social and familial practices that perpetuate inequality (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 48). Itohan's stance is not merely a personal assertion, but rather a broader critique of the systemic gender oppression embedded in cultural and familial norms, highlighting the ways in which patriarchal structures seek to deny seek to deny women agency over their choices and lives.

Furthermore, Itohan's invocation of "natural instincts" serves as a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of patriarchal control, suggesting that women's moral agency and decision-making capacity are rooted in their own embodied experiences and intuition, rather than in the dictates of patriarchal authority (Kolawole, 1997, p. 93). This assertion has profound implications for our understanding of feminist agency and resistance, highlighting the need for women to reclaim their own narratives and challenge the dominant ideologies of power and oppression.

In this sense, Itohan's declaration can be seen as a manifestation of the broader feminist project of decolonizing the mind and reconstituting the cultural

imaginary, whereby women's voices and experiences are centered and validated, and the dominant narratives of patriarchal power are subverted and challenged (Azuike, 2003, p. 27). Ultimately, Itohan's assertion serves as a powerful testament to the enduring power of feminist resistance and the imperative of challenging systemic gender oppression in all its forms.

Moreover, Itohan's statement underscores the tension between individual desire and societal expectation, highlighting the ways in which women's choices are often constrained by the demands of patriarchal norms (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 71). By asserting her own desires and instincts, Itohan challenges the notion that women's identities are solely defined by their relationships with others, and instead claims a sense of self-hood and agency that is independent of patriarchal expectations.

In addition, Itohan's declaration highlights the importance of listening to and centering women's voices, particularly in contexts where they have been historically marginalized or silenced (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 48). By amplifying Itohan's assertion, we can begin to challenge the dominant narratives of power and privilege, and create a more just and equitable society that values and respects the experiences and perspectives of all individuals.

Ultimately, Itohan's statement serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the importance of feminist resistance in challenging systemic oppression.

Feminist Themes in *Women of Owu* by Femi Osofisan

Erelu Afin, the surviving matriarch, assumes a pivotal role in the final ritual lamentations for Oba Akinjobi, thereby subverting traditional patriarchal norms by performing a function typically reserved for men. Through a poignant display of ritualized dance and song, she channels the collective grief of the community, elegizes the deceased, and intimates the bleak future that awaits the women. The juxtaposition of Erelu's mature agency with the vulnerable figure of her daughter Adeoti, who is spared from the ravages of war, serves to underscore the disproportionate suffering endured by women.

In invoking the patron god Anlugbua, Erelu confronts forces beyond her mortal realm, ultimately surrendering to a transformative act of communal sacrifice, thereby bridging the ancestral past with the uncertain future. This paradigmatic act of self-immolation underscores her agency and resilience, as she asserts moral, spiritual, and social authority in a patriarchal context that seeks to constrain her (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 48).

Feminist theory illuminates Erelu's role as a potent symbol of female empowerment, highlighting her capacity to challenge and subvert patriarchal norms (Kolawole, 1997, p. 93). Osofisan's portrayal of women as active agents of continuity, leadership, and survival, even in the face of systemic oppression and wartime violence, underscores the complex interplay between patriarchal structures and female agency (Azuike, 2003, p. 27). Erelu's transformative sacrifice serves as a powerful testament to the enduring capacity of women to resist, subvert, and transcend the constraints of patriarchal power.

Moreover, Erelu's actions underscore the importance of recognizing and valuing women's experiences and perspectives, particularly in contexts where they have been historically marginalized or silenced (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 71). By centering Erelu's narrative, Osofisan challenges the dominant discourses of power and privilege, offering a nuanced and complex portrayal of female agency and resilience in the face of oppression.

Furthermore, Erelu's character serves as a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant patriarchal discourse, highlighting the ways in which women can reclaim their own narratives and challenge the structures of power that seek to constrain them (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 48). Through her portrayal of Erelu, Osofisan offers a profound exploration of the complex interplay between patriarchal structures and female agency, highlighting the enduring capacity of women to resist, subvert, and transcend the constraints of patriarchal power.

In addition, Erelu's transformative act of sacrifice has profound implications for our understanding of feminist agency and resistance, highlighting the need for women to reclaim their own narratives and challenge the dominant ideologies of power and oppression (Kolawole, 1997, p. 93). By amplifying Erelu's narrative, we

can begin to challenge the dominant narratives of power and privilege, and create a more just and equitable society that values and respects the experiences and perspectives of all individuals.

Ultimately, Erelu's transformative act of sacrifice serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the importance of feminist resistance in challenging systemic oppression (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 48). Through her portrayal of Erelu, Osofisan offers a profound exploration of the complex interplay between patriarchal structures and female agency, highlighting the enduring capacity of women to resist, subvert, and transcend the constraints of patriarchal power.

In conclusion, Erelu's character serves as a powerful symbol of female empowerment and resistance, highlighting the need for women to reclaim their own narratives and challenge the dominant ideologies of power and oppression (Azuike, 2003, p. 27). Through her portrayal of Erelu, Osofisan offers a nuanced and complex portrayal of female agency and resilience in the face of oppression, underscoring the importance of feminist resistance in challenging systemic oppression and creating a more just and equitable society

Cultural and Historical Contexts of Women's Portrayal

The portrayal of women in *Women of Owu* and *Itohan: The Betrothed* is situated within a complex web of cultural and historical contexts that profoundly shape societal expectations, gender roles, and female agency. These plays offer a nuanced exploration of how African women navigate the intricate patriarchal norms, social hierarchies, and historical realities that influence their opportunities, responsibilities, and vulnerabilities.

In *Women of Owu*, the historical context of the Owu war serves as a paradigmatic example of the vulnerability of women in war, illustrating how cultural practices, including patriarchal inheritance and wartime slavery, rendered them objects of male control (Osofisan, pp. 10-11). The play situates women at the center of this historical trauma, portraying their suffering, resilience, and strategies of survival. Women's roles were culturally prescribed, with social expectations emphasizing fidelity, domestic management, and moral guardianship. Erelu Afin's character

exemplifies this, as she assumes a pivotal role in the final ritual lamentations, subverting traditional patriarchal norms by performing a function typically reserved for men.

In *Itohan: The Betrothed*, the cultural context revolves around traditional Nigerian norms regarding marriage, family, and gender roles. Itohan's resistance to child betrothal and forced marriage illustrates both the personal and societal challenges African women face in asserting autonomy (Okoh, pp. 51-52). The play highlights the tension between inherited traditions and contemporary ideas of human rights, individual liberty, and gender equality, underscoring the need for a critical reevaluation of cultural norms and practices.

Both plays reveal that African women's experiences are inseparable from the historical and cultural milieus in which they live. By situating women within these contexts, Osofisan and Okoh foreground the complex interplay between tradition, history, and gender, demonstrating how women navigate oppressive systems, resist subjugation, and assert agency. This nuanced portrayal serves as a powerful testament to the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the importance of feminist resistance in challenging systemic oppression. Drama serves as a tool for feminist advocacy and social change, amplifying women's voices, exposing patriarchal structures, and encouraging moral and ethical reflection. *Women of Owu* and *Itohan: The Betrothed* exemplify how theatre can function as a platform for social critique, moral reflection, and cultural interrogation, promoting social change through performance and education.

The plays also function as educational tools, preserving cultural memory while interrogating it. *Women of Owu* contextualizes the historical consequences of warfare and the specific vulnerabilities of women, while Itohan: The Betrothed addresses contemporary issues such as forced marriage and gendered social expectations. Ultimately, both plays offer profound insights into the complex interplay between patriarchal structures and female agency, highlighting the enduring capacity of women to resist, subvert, and transcend the constraints of patriarchal power (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 48; Kolawole, 1997, p. 93; Azuike, 2003, p. 27). The portrayal of women in these plays serves as a powerful testament

to the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the importance of feminist resistance in challenging systemic oppression.

Furthermore, the plays demonstrate how women's experiences are shaped by multiple and intersecting systems of oppression, including patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 71). By centering women's narratives, Osofisan and Okoh challenge the dominant discourses of power and privilege, offering a nuanced and complex portrayal of female agency and resilience in the face of oppression. *Women of Owu* and *Itohan: The Betrothed* offer a profound exploration of the complex interplay between patriarchal structures and female agency, highlighting the enduring capacity of women to resist, subvert, and transcend the constraints of patriarchal power. The plays serve as a powerful testament to the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the importance of feminist resistance in challenging systemic oppression.

Moreover, the plays underscore the need for a critical reevaluation of cultural norms and practices, highlighting the tension between inherited traditions and contemporary ideas of human rights, individual liberty, and gender equality. By situating women at the center of their narratives, Osofisan and Okoh offer a nuanced and complex portrayal of female agency and resilience in the face of oppression, challenging dominant discourses of power and privilege. Ultimately, the portrayal of women in *Women of Owu* and *Itohan: The Betrothed* serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of feminist resistance in challenging systemic oppression and promoting social change.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that Nigerian drama is a powerful medium for interrogating patriarchy and advancing feminist ideals. Through the analysis of Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* and Julie Okoh's *Itohan*, this article has shown that women in Nigerian drama are not merely passive figures, but central agents of resilience, resistance, and transformation. The plays collectively affirm that drama functions not only as entertainment, but also as a tool for cultural critique and social change, challenging oppressive traditions and contributing to the ongoing struggle for gender equality in Nigerian society. The paper's findings highlight the importance of promoting feminist drama in education, encouraging female voices

in theatre, reforming cultural practices, and using drama for public enlightenment. By centering the experiences of African women and recognizing the agency and autonomy of female characters, African Feminism and Womanism provide a nuanced understanding of the ways in which women navigate and resist patriarchal power structures. These frameworks underscore the significance of contextualizing feminist discourse within the specific historical and cultural experiences of African women, recognizing the diversity of women's experiences and the ways in which multiple systems of oppression intersect to shape women's lives.

Moreover, this study underscores the need for a critical reevaluation of cultural norms and practices, highlighting the tension between inherited traditions and contemporary ideas of human rights, individual liberty, and gender equality. By situating women at the center of their narratives, Osofisan and Okoh offer a great and complex portrayal of female agency and resilience in the face of oppression, challenging dominant discourses of power and privilege. Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing academic conversations on the role of drama in interrogating gender roles and advocating for women's rights, emphasizing the importance of female representation in Nigerian theatre and promoting a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminism. The study's findings have implications for policy and practice, highlighting the need for policymakers and stakeholders to prioritize women's empowerment and gender equality in Nigerian society.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that Nigerian schools and universities integrate feminist plays into literature and theatre curricula, create more opportunities for female playwrights and directors to tell women's stories, and critically re-examine traditions that oppress women. Additionally, government and NGOs should employ drama as a tool for social campaigns on women's rights, and scholars should continue to examine feminist themes in African literature and drama, comparing male and female perspectives across more texts.

Recommendations:

-Promotion of Feminist Drama in Education: Nigerian schools and universities should integrate feminist plays into literature and theatre curricula.

- Encouragement of Female Voices in Theatre: More opportunities should be created for female playwrights and directors to tell women's stories.

- Reform of Cultural Practices: Communities should critically re-examine traditions that oppress women.

- Use of Drama for Public Enlightenment: Government and NGOs should employ drama as a tool for social campaigns on women's rights.

- Further Research: Scholars should continue to examine feminist themes in African literature and drama, comparing male and female perspectives across more texts.

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