



FEMALES AS HEROINES AND PATRIOTS IN WRITTEN IGBO DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

*Is the female child inferior to her male counterpart? Is the capability of being physically and mentally fit the exclusive preserve of the male child? Are there natural qualities the female child is endowed commensurably with her male counterparts? These are the kernel issues on which investigations are carried out in this paper. In doing this, attention is drawn to what obtains in Igbo literary creations. Specifically examined are the natural qualities Igbo playwrights ascribe to female characters in selected written Igbo drama texts, namely: Akoma's *Obidiya*, Maduekwe's *Otu Mkpisi Aka* and Onyekwunwu's *Eri Mar Ngwugwu*. Both the heroic and patriotic achievements of the different female characters in the texts are isolated to debunk the popular notion that: 'females are the weaker sex'. In conclusion, the paper asserts the equality of men and women.*

Keywords: *Female, characters, heroism, patriotism, Igbo*

INTRODUCTION

In popular Igbo thinking and social perception, women are assumed to be physically and intellectually incapable of competing favourably with men. For this, Igbo people tend to hold in contempt and disregard any man who takes on a woman in a fight or engages in physical conflict with a woman. Women are also thought to be fickle-minded and incapable to conceal secrets, reason aright, or withstand rigorous mental ordeals. Such social notions and perceptions of women as weak could be traced to indigenous Igbo and Judaeo-Christian creation myths that tend to favour the man, while projecting the relationship between man and woman as one between two unequal beings (Ezeigbo (1993: 7). Nmezi (2010; 129) laments that: "women had on the average less education than men" even though they "were endowed with numerous gifts, such as ... perseverance, strength and intelligence", which are "essential ingredients for nation building".

Beyond this notion is another conception which negates the one that perceives females as the weaker partners. In the contemporary era for instance, there is the unpopular notion that: "anything men can do, women can do it even better". Proponents of this novel idea insist that men and women are born on equal. In support of this position are historical facts and evidence, which project the heroic contributions of women. Such women who have shown promethean courage include the legendary Queen Amina of Zaria, Idia of Benin Kingdom, Moremi and Tinubu of Yoruba land.

ISSN: 2408-7920

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We would also like to cite the instance of Queen Sarauniya Amina, a heroine under whose leadership, Zaria enjoyed considerable influence. History has it that:

“Amina was respected by the people of Zaria for her part in warding off the Kwararofa invaders during the later years of the 16th century. During her reign, Zaria’s territory extended to Niger and the Benue and even the Nupe tribe paid her tribute” (Ojelabi, 1970: 49)

As a corollary to the foregoing, this paper seeks to identify and examine female characters whose roles project them as worthy heroines and patriots in written Igbo drama. The selected written Igbo drama texts are: Akoma’s *Obidiya*, Maduekwe’s *Otu Mkpisi Aka* and Onyekawu’s *Eri Mara Ngwugwu*.

HEROISM AND FEMALE CHARACTERS

A hero is defined as a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strength or ability; an illustrious warrior; one that shows great courage; “the central figure in an event or period..., someone who is admired for their bravery, goodness, or great ability..., someone who has performed an act of great courage under very dangerous conditions ..., a man of distinguished valour, the person who has the principal share in some exploit, or in a play, novel...” (Balogun, 1981:1; Summers, 1989: 491; and Patterson, nd: 186). Heroism is an attribute that earns a person great respect in his society and elevates him to a phenomenal social status. As such, a hero is someone who performs feats beyond the ability of ordinary people (Nnabuihe, 1991: 62).

In both the oral and written Igbo literary arts, there abound women who have performed acts of immense courage. One of such women is Nne Mgbaafọ. Commenting on this, heroic feminine legendary figure, Azuonye (1981: 57) notes that:

Nne Mgbaafọ ... meets and marries a man named Uduma. Uduma had not yet fulfilled his manhood as required by the heroic ethos of his age by winning a human head in battle, but she is anxious to fend off the shame of living with such a man whose age mate would despise as a dishonourable coward (onye ujo). Nne Mgbaafọ cooks a special meal for her husband and urges him to go to a war which had just broken out in Ibibio land. Uduma goes and is slain in battle ... she discovers the beheaded body of her husband in a pile of slain warriors. She dutifully buries the corpse under a tree and sacrifices a goat on the grave ... Nne Mgbaafọ assails, overpowers and chops off the head of a young man ..., and subsequently buries his body in her husband’s grave as a fitting companion to the land of spirits.

The heroic exploits of Nne Mgbaafọ informed by Qhafia Igbo traditional source are similar to those of Obidiya, the heroine of Akoma’s *Obidiya*. When her husband, Onuma, is murdered in cold blood by assassins hired by Oriaku Dike, she vows to wreak vengeance on him for masterminding the assassination. She refuses to hand over the case



to the police whose inefficiency, she claims, often denies complainants of justice. She also rejects the counsels of Ụmụ Nnadi and Onyenweala to leave vengeance to God. When she is told to endure the cold blood murder of her husband Ọnụma, she retorts:

<i>Die gini? Die enweghi mmadu:</i>	<i>Endure what! Endure no relations!</i>
<i>Die ura atughi! Die ogbenye!</i>	<i>Endure sleeplessness! Endure poverty!</i>
<i>Ndi nwe m, ndidi nwere oke!</i>	<i>My lords, endurance has a limit!</i>
<i>(Obidiya: p. 27)</i>	<i>(Translation mine)</i>

In response to further persuasions meant to remind her of the importance of endurance over evil influences that be-devil man on earth, she says:

<i>Na nke a? ... O bughị na nke a</i>	<i>On this? ... Not on this ...</i>
<i>Ada Onyiridike Agbaghegbe,</i>	<i>Daughter of Onyiridike agbaghegbe,</i>
<i>o bu gi ka mmadu ibe gi ga-azọ ukwu</i>	<i>Are you the one others will trample</i>
<i>n'isi n'ih na i bu nwaanyi? O bu</i>	<i>on the head because you are female?</i>
<i>Eziokwu na i ghoala nwaanyi na-</i>	<i>Is it true that you have become a</i>
<i>Enweghi di? Asị, Olee Onuma?</i>	<i>Widow? It is a lie!</i>
<i>Onuma m anoghi ya... Asị. Asị!</i>	<i>Where is Onuma My Onuma is no</i>
<i>Uka adighi ya ... (27 – 28)</i>	<i>more ... Lie. Lie! No trouble...</i>

From the inception of his intrigues to eliminate Onuma and appropriate his landed property, Oriaku Dike underrates the ability of Obidiya because she is a woman. Onuegbu (2010: 317) notes that “Oriaku feels that Onuma has no body except his wife (Obidiya) a barren woman, who would not be able to avenge her husband’s death”. He (Oriaku) boasts:

<i>Onye ga-ekwu? Nwaanyi ya ga-eme gini?</i>	<i>Who will talk? What will his wife do?</i>
<i>Nwaanyi bu nwaanyi. O sie ike m</i>	<i>Female is female. At most I call her</i>
<i>kpọ ya n'ulo nye ya ego, luo ya</i>	<i>into the house offer her money and marry her.</i>

He is so enmeshed in this illusion that even as the murder is accomplished, he maintains:
O nweghi ihe nwunye ya ga-eme ..., *His wife will do nothing...*

But Obidiya is much more than Oriaku Dike thinks of her. To prove this rare quality in her, Obidiya supplicates the spirit of Onuma for courage, guidance and strength.

In her supplication, Obidiya entreats the spirit of her late husband to turn her to a male. She pleads:

<i>Nuru olu m, di m, di m Onuma</i>	<i>Hear me, my husband, my husband Onuma.</i>
<i>Agaghi m ezu ike ruo mgbe ezi</i>	<i>I shall not rest until that family which killed</i>
<i>na ulo ahụ gburu gi jekwara udi</i>	<i>you goes the way you went. The Arọ</i>
<i>ije a i jere. Nwa Aru maa ibe ya</i>	<i>child knows his mate. Please, my darling</i>

ISSN: 2408-7920



*Biko, di m oma, topu agbu nke
ili kulie, du m n'ije. Zi m uzọ, nye
m ike, mee ka m ghọọ nwoke
buso ndi iro gi agha. Ziputa
n'ezie na di m nwuru anwu
na-ahu uzọ... (28).*

*husband, loose the bonds of grave,
lead me on. Show me the way, give
me strength, turn me into a man to
fight your enemies. Prove indeed
that my late husband still sees.*

It should be noted that “a male” as seen in Obidiya’s entreaty to the spirit of her murdered husband for help does not refer to physiognomy of the natural male sex; rather it refers to courage, strength and determination. Therefore, while Oriaku Dike feels that his problems are put behind him by the death of Onuma, he hardly realises that the trouble has just begun. She asserts:

*Ije eruola ... Anọ m n'ụwa
eme ginj?...
Egede esirile ... (64)*

*The journey is set to commence...
What else am I doing on earth?...
The stage is set...*

Obidiya chooses to hit back at Oriaku Dike when he least expected it. On his happiest day, a day he is publicly honoured by the king and his entire community with a chieftaincy title, his unexpected death comes.

True to her vow, Obidiya pursues vengeance with unimaginable vigour. She engages the services of Akakaaka the herbalist who obtains the assistance of the same assassins Oriaku Dike used to murder Onuma, to hit back at him. After the assassination of Oriaku, Obidiya exposes their flagitious activities in the society to the officers of the law. Hence Umụ Nnadi informs the reader:

*Na-achoputala, kpeekwa
Ogbuu na ndi otu ya ikpe Ochụ...
Taa, aka ndi ochichị akparala ha...
Ogbu mma ga-ala na mma ...
Nke unu agwula, Omife (63)*
(Omeife, Ogbuu and Diogu are the assassins in the play, *Obidiya*)

*That it has been revealed,
Ogbu and his co-assassins are tried for murder...
Today, the law has caught up with them...
He who murders by the sword shall die by the sword...
Yours are finished, Omeife.*

For more than Oriaku’s plot, Obidiya goes ahead to cause the death of all Oriaku Dike’s children; thus, fully accomplishing her vengeance bid. Having accomplished her task, Obidiya remarks:

*O di nke ga-eme ya mee
Onuma, ije m agwula.
Echi ma o bu taa, lee anya m
Oge anyi ruru ebe ahụ ka
Ikpe diri anyi nile. Ka ndi
mmadu mata; Oganihu nke
aku na uba nwere ogwugwu (86)*

*Whatever will happen, let it
Onuma, my journey is ended
Tomorrow or today, expect me.
When we get there, let us all be
subjected to judgement.
That people may know that a progress built
on wealth is time bound.*



In *Otu Mkpisi Aka* (1979) which is the second play we examine here, we see the heroine, Nwamaka who towers over all other characters. She is energetic, wealthy and wise. She supports her father's family financially, controls and directs all affairs of her family members and commands their respects. Onuegbu (2010: 314) confirms that Nwamaka "is wise and very hardworking". When her family faces a problem that smears shame on its reputation, Nwamaka switches roles with her male sibling Chikwe, to fight the course. She subsumes herself in love of honour and respect for her family and confidently leads her brother and Nwakaego another female character, to a rescue operation in Gudele. The aim is to surmount all obstacles and rescue her sister, Obiageli with her baby and bring them back home safely. While the two female characters in the rescue mission, Nwamaka and Nwakaego exhibit courage and optimism, the only male among them, Chikwe, is diffident. The following dialogue ensues between them:

- Nwamaka: *Chikwe, kwusi okwu a di ka ihe nwanyi na-ekwu...*
(Chikwe, stop these comments which are like what women utter...)
- Chikwe: *Hmmm, gi bu o ji oso agbakwu ogo, i chetakwara na ogo bu onwu?*
(Hmmm, you who rush in to engage in a fight, do you still realise that fighting is death?)
- Nwakaego: *Chikwe, amaghi m ma o bu e gbuo gi bu nwoke mma, ma i gakwari agbaputa obara ... (Otu Mkpisi Aka p. 75)*
(Chikwe, I do not know if you the male (in our midst) will ever gush out blood if you are ripped.)
- Chikwe: *Hei! Obodo nke a ikwighikweighi na-atu n'ehihie, a sikwororo na onye obia batara obodo a ga-ala?*
(Hei! This community in which the owls hoot at noon, who says that strangers who sojourn through it will survive?)

At the end, Nwamaka is able to wriggle out of death clutches at Gudele where her other companions pay the supreme price. Her courage and the gods play a great role in her success in the play. It is such that she is the only survivor of the Nwaoma invaders and those they try to rescue from Gudele. When lightning strikes and thunder follows without any sign of rain, Nwamaka the heroine, like one favoured by the gods is mysteriously safe while members of her rescue team including the baby in her hand perish. She laments:

Ewooo! Ewooo! Efuola m efuo oo?
Nwa nu anwuom n'aka eee!...
Egbe eluigwe atugbuo nwa Obiageri
nu ee! ... Unu dizikwa ndu eee! ...
Unu abia hapu m n'uzo ije
nwusja... (88 – 89)

Oh! Oh! I am lost indeed!
The child dies in my hand
Thunder strikes dead Obiageri's child
Are you people even alive! ...
You have all left me, on the way and
perished...!



Since there is no response to her complaints and laments, we hold that she remains the last one standing ostensibly to narrate their experience to their expectant kinsmen at home.

Patriotism and Female Characters

The heroine in *Eri Marā Ngwugwu* (1985) exhibits her heroic exploits in quite a different dimension – one that affects her love life adversely and shakes her very existence. Orijeji, the heroine, chooses to abandon the warmth and comfort of her marriage and her safety in order to fight crime to save her society. Ultimately, Orijeji pays the supreme price for her unrivalled patriotism.

Orijeji sadly notices the transformation in her husband's habits as he begins to keep late nights, bad friends and as well keeps away from home for days. On investigation, she discovers her husband's criminal engagements (stealing, kidnapping, human trafficking and ritual killings)

When Orijeji confronts her husband with her findings and implores him to turn a new leaf, he batters her. Her boldness earns her merciless beating from her husband. She was beaten to a state of unconsciousness. She narrates:

*Ma ihe o mere bụ ijide m
kụọ m ihe tinka kuru paanu
nke mere ka m rịa ahụ otu izu ụka (7)*

*But what he did was to seize me,
hit me as a tinker hits a panel,
which made me sick for one week.*

Events came to a head the day Orijeji made a startling discovery of human parts hidden in an old box in their house by her husband:

*Ụbọchị m huziri ihe ka m anya ele
bụ ụbọchị m gara na nnukwu ochie
igbe dị n'ụlọ anyị ichọ ihe wee hụ
otu ngwugwu mụ na-akpataghị
isi ya na ya. Ka m tọpere ngwugwu a,
ahuru m isi mmadu, ire mmadu, anya
mmadu na mkpisi aka mmadu. ... (7- 8)*

*The day I saw what I could not
fathom was a day I went to a big
old box in our house to search for
something and saw a parcel I could
not fashion its mission in it. As I
unwrapped it, I saw human heads,
human tongues, human eyes and
human fingers....*

She could no longer bear the situation. So, she exposes her husband's crimes. Elemu (2007: 42) states that "Mr. Okwuike Ogbunanjo is reported to the police by his wife because of his nefarious activities like ritual murder, stealing, and so on".

*Ihe m mere bụ igbaga ozigbo ga kporo
Ndi uwe ojii. Ha sooro m ozigbo gaa
wee hụ ihe ndi a nile, ha malitere
ozigbo chowa ya tutu na aka ha akpara
ya ...E mechara tọọ ya mkporo iri afo
abuo ... (8)*

*What I did was to turn at once to inform
the police. They followed me immediately
to see all these things; they commenced
to track him, until they nabbed him...
later on he was jailed for twenty years
...*



In spite of all these, Orijeji's husband remains unrepentant even after his incarceration. The moment he regains his freedom, Okwuike Ogbunanjo goes on to hunt his wife, Orijeji, for elimination.

(Aka akwo n'uzo, ... O bu Okwuike Ogbunanjo) I ghoola ozu ugbu a ... (todosisie ya aka ike n'akpiri) ... ka anyi kpezie ginii? na ndu ka o bu n'onwu. I chere na o bu i ga kporo m ndi uwe ojii? I chere na mu anwuola? I ga-ebu uzo mata ka onwu na-adi ugbu a, ugbu a (Ya atodosisie nwanji a aka ike n'akpiri, ka o kwusi ikwu okwu, anya ya chagharikwara, ire ya aputakwa, ya atogbuo ya, tupu ozu ya n'ala) Nwa uchui! Gaakwa kporo m ndi uwe ojii; ... (pp. 17 – 18)

(There goes a knock on the door, ... It is Okwuike Ogbunanjo) You have become a corpse now ... (held her fiercely at the throat) ... Let us discuss what? In life or in death? You thought that it is all about handing me over to the police? You thought I am dead? You will first and foremost know what it takes to be dead this instance, no (He held this woman much more fiercely at the throat, so that she should cease breathing, her eyeballs turned, her tongue stuck out, he strangulated her, and threw down her corpse on the floor) Mischievous fool! Return and hand me over to the police).

Onuegbu (2010: 320) confirms Elemuo's claim of Orijeji's heroism and patriotism as she "exposes her husband's nefarious activities: stealing, selling people into slavery, killing and selling human parts to money ritualists" to the law. Thus, both Elemuo (2007) and Onuegbu (2010) acknowledge the heroic and patriotic attributes of the female character in the written Igbo drama, *Erii Mara Ngwugwu*.

CONCLUSION

This paper has analysed the issue of women as inferior beings based on the roles of some female characters in selected Igbo drama texts. The paper controverts the popular notion that being female connotes weakness and contends that the wrong assumption should no longer be held to be wholly true. The paper identifies historical personalities and events as substrata for its arguments on the portrayal of female characters in selected Igbo plays to support its findings on the heroic and patriotic roles of women. Akoma's Obidiya in *Obidiya* pursues her course to avenge the brutal murder of her beloved husband assiduously until she single-handedly achieves a feat. Maduekwe's Nwamaka in *Otu Mkpisi Aka* confirms that women can face up to challenges of honour and integrity. In the face of apparent danger, Nwamaka led a search party from the town Nwaoma in an inter-village invasion to rescue her younger sister, Obiageri and her child from Gudele. On the part of Onyekaonwu's female hero in *Erii Mara Ngwugwu*, there is no gain-saying the fact that she is a rare breed: she let go her personal comfort, safety and life so as to rid the society of criminals and criminalities. Finally, this paper holds that heroism is



not a monopoly of the male counterpart neither does feminism connote mind and body weaknesses. In other words, not all males are heroes and not all females are weaklings. Given the same opportunity, exposure and encouragement, both sexes are capable of producing heroes, heroines and patriots needed for the building and preservation of human dignity, family reputation, social norms, national integrity and world peace.

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