

# Investigating the Gender of God: Theatre Design in Pursuance of Gender Equality in Nigeria

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## Abstract

This is a critical study in response to the social effects of gender conflicts in Africa, with reference to Nigeria. The subject of gender has continued to generate divergent opinions among scholars and gender practitioners whereas this concept is only man-made and is not fundamental to the primordial concepts which lay theoretical claims to the origin of the human race. The objective of the study, therefore, is to offer a timely intervention in order to forestall an eventual withdrawal of the female gender from Theatre Design. The theoretical framework considers the anti-western premise, juxtaposed alongside the biblical account of human origin, which confers the designation: “man” on all human beings regardless of gender, applauding the pre-colonial communal status of the African woman. The research methodology involved In-Depth Interview (IDI) and Participatory Observation. Thus, the findings, through qualitative and quantitative analysis, show that there is conflict, between the male and female genders in Nigeria, resulting from what Illah called “Freudian slight and organised intellectual second fiddling” by the female gender (xiii). The conclusion is that balance in gender activism will enhance equal gender participation in theatrical design on the Nigerian stage.

**Keywords:** Gender, Theatre Design, Equality, Man.

## 1. Introduction

The role of women in the society cannot be overemphasized. Pogson notes that “the roles of women all over the world are those of nurturer of families...They provide more healthcare than all organised health services put together” (40). In the Nigerian society, “traditional mores reprobated individualism and accretion, accentuated cooperation, collectivism and sharing” Omonubi-McDonnell (11). However,

breakthroughs on women issues at the international level can be traced to the establishment of the Women’s International organization in 1919, made up of about fifteen women NGOs under the auspices of the league of Nations. This organisation ensured that women’s concerns were placed on the agenda of the league. The establishment of the United nations in 1945 and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 further advance the interests of women at the international level. Their roles, involvement and contributions to national development were gradually being re-defined. The United Nations Economic Surveys and Studies in the early 1970s opened a new chapter in the U N’s perception of women’s issues.

The subject of gender has, since, continued to attract international interests, thereby generating different views and opinions including disagreements and inconsistencies almost at alarming dimensions. “However,” as this has already been observed, “gender relations are not internally cohesive. They contain contradictions and imbalances, particularly when there have been changes in the wider socio economic environment” (Kabeer, 23). This is probably because most scholars and practitioners in gender-related fields tend to make general conclusions to problems that should rather be relative to different socio-cultural factors. Hence, Kabeer further reflects thus:

Gender relations, like all social relations, are multi-stranded: they embody ideas, values, identities; they allocate labour between different tasks, activities, and domains; they determine distribution of resources; and they assign authority, agency, and decision-making power. This means that gender inequalities are multi-dimensional and cannot be reduced to some single and universally agreed set of priorities. Any attempt to do so will run the danger of being either too narrow (as the MDGs have been accused of being) or a wish list that is too long and complex to act on. (23)

Modern African women, having been seemingly whitewashed by their Western-minded contemporaries, now capitalize on the erroneous, narrow and unfairly generalized “marginalization theories” as a platform for considering the non-inclusion of the female gender in the so-called male-dominated fields like Theatre Design. However, traditionally, most vocational fields in Africa encouraged participation from both male and female genders, particularly the arts of the theatre as epitomised in traditional masquerade performances. Illah consequently points out that “the performative is the necessary interface because in all epochs, it represents an iconographic index of participation. The performative will also necessarily mediate the power equations of the society” (xiii).

Omonubi-McDonnell recommends that the study of the African woman should be based on African

feminism because "...African feminism has broad variables including gender, race, religion, class, tradition, sexuality, cosmology, religion – all these provide rich parameters that can be universally employed to explore gender exploitation" (18) Nevertheless, Illah also predicts, that "inevitably in the current climate of African renaissance issues of Africinity will clash with claims of universalism. But ... Africa has a responsibility to the world, as its enduring fountain, to replenish it from the twin malaise of routine and crassness. African women stand on the threshold of gulf..." (viii)

The Western approach to the study of the African woman, as an offshoot of globalization and neo-colonialism has yielded negative consequences of no small measure as may be observed in the low participation of women in the technical aspects of the theatre. Hence, "consequently, a shift in one aspect of the social relations can initiate a series of changes in other aspects, with unpredictable consequences (Kabeer, 23)."

The problem, which has necessitated this study, is that the Western views of gender-related issues have conditioned the minds of African women especially in Nigeria, towards the erroneous perception of some technical activities as male-specific, particularly Theatre Design. The objective, therefore, is to critique the relationship between the position of the African woman and what they are purported to be in Western scholarship in order to encourage balanced gender participation in technical fields such as Theatre Design. The theoretical framework explores the anti-western premise alongside the biblical account of the origin of human beings. "The anti-westerners applaud the status of the, communal pre-colonial African woman" (Omonubi-McDonnell, 8). The research methodology involved In-Depth Interview (IDI) and participatory observation.

This paper is structured into five main parts. The first part is the introduction which states the background and the major question posed by the subject of gender, this section also indicates why this question has necessitated a study. The second part is the review of earlier scholarly attempts as well as their limitations in dealing with problem of misrepresentation of the African woman by Western-oriented writers and theorists. The third is the critical consideration of the male gender, female gender and the possible gender associated with "god" in accordance with one of the theories on the origin of man. The fourth part is the discourse on the challenges of gender-oriented attitudes to the practice of technical theatre and especially design. The fifth segment is the conclusion that there should be a balance in gender relations in order to improve female participation in technical theatre.

## 2. Misrepresentation of the African Woman

There is an indication that the society today experiences conflicts as a result of gender interests. While some scholars hold the opinion that the female gender, especially in Africa, has been marginalized and tend to struggle for its liberation, there are others who feel there is no basis for such agitation. This is perhaps because the latter also feel that such claim of marginalization is only erroneous and its hue and cry, taken too far. Therefore, a compromise becomes necessary if meaningful development is desired. Nwanya states that:

observers of economic growth are of the opinion that for a meaningful or even development to occur, men and women must endeavour to work together to improve world economy. Unfortunately, gender inequality has created big vacuum and has made nonsense of various economic reforms that serve as roadmaps to economic development. (117)

The nature of the tussle for dominance between the male and the female genders has continued to generate such conflict that is capable of hampering national development especially in Nigeria. While some feminists assume the female gender is dominated by the male, some gender theorists agree that the misunderstandings that arise from spousal abuse are usually a social issue which could emanate from either of the genders. In the discourse on domestic violence, in her *Gender Equality in Nigeria*, Omonubi-McDonnell agrees that "feminists define spousal abuse as maltreatment, mistreatment, of a spouse. Feminists believe that spousal abuse is discernible through a scrutiny of the social system (37)." This assertion ordinarily presupposes that gender abuse can be perpetrated against any gender by any gender.

The African woman is respected and given a lofty position in the society unlike the representation given by the Western oriented theorists and scholars. This class of scholars often tend to characterize the African woman as poor, backward and extremely helpless. This may not always be so because tradition, as far as Africa is concerned, respects women and this is evident in the various traditional institutions especially marriage among the Yoruba where men are culturally compelled to offer expensive sacrifices in cash as well as in kind. The opinions of most Western oriented scholars have been considered by the anti-western premise as often erroneous. Hence:

The African woman is a subject of analysis by many scholars. Often times, the scholars' writings portray an erroneous evaluation of the African woman"... ..This premise firmly believes that women in Africa are subjugated, behind and peripheral. Scholars with Europeanized perspective of development largely consider African culture and customs as primal and undesirable and consequently blame them for the peripheral condition of women. (Omonubi-McDonnell, 7-8)

It is important to understand that some scholars merely generalise reports that focus on women in the Western world and relate them to African women without any relative consideration. For instance, the awareness of gender consciousness emanated from the Senacca Falls Convention in 1848, which had its focus on the inferior social roles of the American women. Hence Pogason reports that,

The Senacca Falls Convention held in 1848, brought about the spread of the awareness of women's inferior roles in society. At the convention resolutions were passed, which led to a conscious orientation or equality in the society. It also enabled the American woman assert her rights and utilise her potentials. (41)

In response to the erroneous reports of the Western scholars on the status and conditions of African women, a relativist gender theorist, Omonubi-McDonnell, retorts:

The status of women is relative. African women play crucial roles in the economic and social sectors of their nations, but the analyses of these functions by Western writers have been deficient in truth and comprehension. Indeed relativists feel that it is erroneous to stereotype African women as disadvantaged and deprived masses. They stress that each ethnicity and community of African women have unique attitudes, values and characteristics. One thing that women in Africa have in common is the undisputed fact that they are the pillars of production and the bedrock of the family. Generalizing them as a lump of subordinates is a misplacement of fact. (9-10)

In addition to depicting the African woman as a sufferer of the dominance of the male counterpart, a good number of scholars also ignore or sometimes downplay the impacts of colonization and enslavement in the process. To some extent, the idea that women are victims of male domination may be factual, but it is also very important to observe that the situation has not always been like that. "The status of women in pre-colonial African societies, and especially in Nigeria, was strikingly different from what it is now" (Omonubi-McDonnell, 10). Apart from the fact that the traditional institution of marriage in Nigeria and especially among the Yoruba of the Southwest lays great emphasis on the woman by compelling the man and his entire family to go prostrate before the woman and her family, with monetary gifts, some traditions cults also allows women a considerable level of participation. Kayode opines that:

For example, women are allowed to participate in certain cultic activities including *egungun* (ancestral spirit) and *gelede* but they are forbidden from viewing *oro*, which is an all male cult. This view finds expression in a Yoruba adage '*awo egungun l' obirin le se, awo gelede lo'birin le wo, b'obirin ba foju k'oro, oro a gbe*' meaning 'women are permitted to know the secrets of both *egungun* and *gelede* cults; if she dares look upon the secrets of *oro*, she would suffer the consequences. (78)

This study is hinged on two valid theories relating to the origin of man bring out a dialectic argument that the concept of gender little or no primary impact on the nature and function of man as a member of society. One theories is the religious conception that man was created by God. Man was created as man and from man woman was created. "God Created 'man' in His own image Male and Female created he created them." the original intention for creation of man was not to polarise or partition.

### 3. Male, Female and the Gender of God

This study explores two basic theoretical sources to generate a clear understanding of the concept of gender. The first is the philosophical, religious or theological assumptions are associated with the Bible, the Quran and the *Ifa* corpus of the Yoruba of Nigeria in West Africa. The interesting coincidence about these sources is that they all contain the accounts of the creation of the human being. For instance, the King James Version of the Bible<sup>1</sup>, in the book of Genesis, (chapter 1: verse 26) states "And God said, Let us make man in our own image, after our own likeness..." The Bible states further in Genesis, (chapter 1: verse 27) "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female created he them." Here, it is easily decipherable that there is a difference between man, male, female and woman. While the word "man" appears to be only a protean vocabulary; with changing attitudes and characteristics symbolizing "male and female", the word "woman" may be taken to mean only "woman." This is further confirmed in the fact that the word "woman" appears for the first time in Genesis, chapter 3 (verse 20) when it is discovered "... but for Adam there was not found a help meet for him" whereas in chapter 1 "man" has been created; "male-and-female."

At this juncture, one may therefore wonder; what is the gender of "god?" The word "man" means "male-and-female" and "man," according to the bible, is believed to have been created "in the image of God". Therefore, if "man," which now means "male-and-female" represents the image of God, then what is the gender of God? The writers of the Bible appear to have been either inconclusive or deliberately challenging the imaginations of their readers about God's gender. They represent God as *both* or *neither* "male" or "female" perhaps to downplay or completely dismiss the gender concept as the issue in humanity even though the Bible assigns roles that are gender-based to man.

#### 4. Theatre Design: Towards Gender Equality

The theatre has come a long way, with a long checkered history behind it. Hence,

The theatre profession had a raw deal in emerging as a worthy occupation in almost every society the world over. For instance, throughout the Dark Ages, theatrical activities were said to be completely suppressed. The church provided stiff opposition to the growth of the theatre profession through various punitive injunctions e.g. actors were denied church sacraments, orders against presenting and attending theatrical performances were issued, etc. The theatre could not have a free growth until the church introduced dramatic interludes in its services essentially to make its teachings more graphic and understandable. During the Elizabethan England all professional actors were, under the operating law, regarded as vagabonds and rogues. It was also not a fashionable profession for women. In Greece, the cradle of theatrical civilization, women did not act at all, and in Rome only if very depraved. It was not until 1562 that the first professional actress, Isabella Andreini emerged in Italy (Brockett, 1969). Instances such as these could be found in many other societies (Ododo, 3).

The challenges of traditional theatre endured simultaneously relatively in different society until the modern era. Egun Clark (1979) generally indicates in the book *Ogunde: The Making of Nigerian Theatre* that actors and actresses or even other persons associated with the theatre in Nigeria during the pioneering years of Ogunde, was often regarded as an *alarinjo*. This is a derisive term which started, at the appearance of modern theatre, as an abuse pointing to artistes as itinerant dancers or "...beggars" (Clark 1979: 4). Many misconceptions existed on the meaning and value of the theatre. Hubert Ogunde faced many challenges while trying to evolve a place for Nigeria. His main challenges also included getting the female gender involved in the practice, because of what people then took theatre to be. There were occasions when men who owned theatre companies would have to marry his female artistes because no man would marry them outside the theatre.

The technical aspect of the theatre is very important because it involves the physical dimensions of the theatre in which complete meaning expressed to the audience. This involves designing and building of the actual stage, lighting and pyrotechnics, props, costume, make-up sound and special effects. It has been aptly noted that "the theatre is usually made up of various elements including the dramatic components such as theme, plot, structure, story, and others such as songs, dances, music, set / technical theatre, props, costume, makeup etc. These considerations variously affect the nature the performance..." Oyewo (2001:2)

Ododo's view once again, on the place of design as an art of the theatre, becomes relevant at this point. Hence,

It is through technical theatre (theatre technology) that the world of a stage play is made more concrete for the audience as it creates the environment that the actors/actresses play in using set design to suggests mood, atmosphere, time and space; through lighting complemented with colours and sound effects as well as establishing characterization through costumes and make-up. In recent times, the use of technical theatre has grown from beyond the stage to outdoor quasi-theatrical activities. (4).

However, regardless of the importance of Theatre Design, as an art of the theatre, the involvement of the female gender has been very low. This is probably an effect of the generalised reports that women are victims of their male counterparts. The crusade on feminism has continued to yield different results in different societies around the world. The African acolytes of this Western gender crusade, whitewashed under the euphoria of being liberated from the male gender, erroneously purported to have victimized them, have now embarked on organised, intellectual, self-relegation. This has not yielded any positive result; instead they simply stay away from some intellectually complex and technical activities and term them "male dominated." In Ododo's opinion such activities include the technical discipline. Hence,

Low women participation in the sciences and science related disciplines is a visible feature of the educational system in Nigeria. This problem has for sometime now engaged serious attention of scholars and key players of the education industry in the country with a view to resolving the gender inequality in enrolment and career pursuits. Technical theatre is a science-related and technical oriented area of specialisation in the humanities that has suffered weak female presence due to certain militating factors that also similarly affect other science courses (Ododo, 1).

A typical illustration of low participation of the female gender abounds in a recent work edited by Irene Salami Agunloye (2008) which focuses on the participation of African women in the theatre profession. Titled *African Women, Drama and Performance*, the book is divided into four parts. The first part has seventeen articles on "African Women Writers," the second part, five articles on "Women and Performance: Stage" third, five articles on "Women and Performance Television and Movies," and the fourth part, nine essays on "Oral Performance." Of all the thirty six essays that make up the entire book which has four hundred and three pages, there was no single write up on Theatre Design or any technical aspects of the theatre. This, therefore, is an apposite insinuation that women particularly in the Nigerian theatre capitalize more on gender activism at the

expense of the extant realities and needs of the Nigerian theatre. Illah blames this on inattention and vague universalism Hence,

One major frontier of the African renaissance is the discourse on African feminism or what one might pose as the woman question in Africa. It is now routine to state that western colonialist historiography beclouds the discourse with in-attention to detail, some vague universalism and lack of thoroughness in providing research information (Illah, xiii).

Ododo, however cites that “Oni (2004:166) for instance, attempts a compilation of Nigerian lighting designers since the 50s to date without a single woman surfacing on his list. All these facts paint a very precarious situation and position that women occupy in the practice of technical theatre in Nigeria”(5).

## 5. Conclusion

Gender activism should not take pre-eminence over the functional roles of women in the society. While it is agreeable to some extent that certain statistics representing women in some disadvantaged circumstances may outsize those of men, most often they are ascribed to biological and demographic reasons. The primordial concept of humanity, as observable in pre-colonial Africa, only allows collaborative, communal relationship between the male and female genders. Anything short of this can lead to gender conflicts such as low female participation technical areas of human enterprise as it is already the case with Theatre Design. As Ododo (6) has suggested, the need for counselling at all of education cannot be overemphasised, hence:

Well-organised counselling units should be established at the primary and secondary levels of education in Nigeria. Among other things, the units should re-orientate the pupils and students respectively against the negative use of sexism in the choice of courses. Barriers of exclusive domains for male in choice of courses should be broken. With the correct frame of mind and understanding at this formative stage of their educational career, they are not likely to suffer any prejudices about some course as exclusive preserve of men. With such freedom of choice, the women are likely to be more adventurous to find out what exactly is special about some courses and areas of specialisation that are dominated by men. It is instructive to note that it took serious encouragement from the pilot father of the first female pilot in Nigeria to achieve that fit. Similar encouragement in formal setting would certainly break the barrier of no go area syndrome. This way, women that find themselves in the theatre profession would therefore have a more positive attitude towards technical theatre.

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