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Women's Human Rights Violations: Transformative Processes in Julie Okoh's *Edewede* and Stella 'Dia Oyedepo's *Brain Has No Gender*

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Abstract

The limitations and violations of women's human rights have dominated dramatic discourse in Nigeria for decades now and Nigerian female dramatists have become established as activists for the rights of women in text and context. This paper sets out to demonstrate that Julie Okoh's *Edewede* and Stella 'Dia Oyedepo's *Brain Has No Gender* are serious treatises on women's rights. The two plays highlight social and cultural rights abuses such as female circumcision, forced marriage, refusal to educate the girl child, preference for male children and how these violations of basic rights inhibit women from realizing their full potential as human beings. Exploring the issues articulated in these two plays reveal that women's human rights in Nigerian society are most often denied or violated on the grounds of culture and tradition hence both playwrights focus their attention on redressing cultural and social rights. The texts illustrate that the medium of drama is an effective tool to campaign against the violations of women's human rights and achieve social transformation. They also suggest methods through which these transformations can be achieved.

[Keywords: Women's human rights, violations, female circumcision, forced marriage, women's education, cultural practices, tradition]

Introduction

Women's human rights are perpetually compromised and violated by the laws and cultures of human societies, making it exigent for women to cry out against socio-cultural practices militating against them. In Nigeria, literary depictions of these injustices and trauma perpetrated on women abound, so we find depictions of the resistance of women to these practices. For the Nigerian female dramatist, these issues are personal because they have experienced it, seen it or heard of it. More often than not, it is a combination of experiences, hence their plays cry out against unacceptable violations of human rights as these issues pertain to women and seek reform of repugnant practices in society. The lives of these playwrights have also been conditioned by the same situations they depict.

This paper addresses the violations of women's rights embedded in cultural practices and beliefs such as female circumcision, forced marriage, women's education and preference for male children as these issues are depicted in Julie Okoh's *Edewede* and Stella 'Dia Oyedepo's *Brain Has No Gender (Brain)*. It demonstrates that the playwrights question the subjection of women to these traditional practices and rituals. They aim to create the awareness that these practices constitute abuses of women's human rights. The dramatists have also used the medium of the plays to present the reality of issues they articulate, and disseminate useful information aimed at transforming the societal perception of the practices in question as well as

eliminate them. The plays advocate a redress of these socio-cultural practices that constitute social injustice and provide a platform from which these dramatists canvass the rights of women.

Human rights are claims, indispensable privileges to which persons are entitled by virtue of being human. 'Human rights' imply that these liberties are universal and are irrespective of sex, status and age; neither are they associated with any particular social, religious or political system. Article 1 The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) proclaimed in 1948 declares:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood.
(1 of 32)

In response to the massive human and material atrocities of World War II, the UDHR was adopted to promote the "... recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" because these rights are "the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world" (4 of 32). 'Inalienable' indicates entitlements, a set of rights that are not awarded by human power (fundamental) and therefore cannot be surrendered.

In addition, The United Nations general assembly eventually went on to adopt the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) in 1981. CEDAW insists on the fundamental rights of women as human beings and equal rights for women and men in all fields irrespective of marital status. It affirms that the human rights of women and girls are inalienable, integral and an indivisible part of universal human rights. The Beijing Conference of 1995 was a major platform for articulating and implementing women's rights. This paper therefore proceeds from the premises that women's rights are human rights. In spite of these, little or no attention has been paid to social inequities and the rights of women, particularly in African cultural societies.

Women's Human Rights Discourses in Nigerian Literature

The plight of the Nigerian woman and the violations of her fundamental human rights have been depicted from various perspectives in Nigerian literature. Male and female writers alike explore women related issues and by their assertions in some of their plays, condemn and insist on the reform of the laws, cultural practices and prejudices that deny or violate the rights of women. However, for the woman writer, these issues are very personal and more often than not, form the nucleus of her creativity. Nigerian literary history provides evidence that it would indeed be hard to find a woman writer in Nigeria whose writing does not exhibit the need to address some problems that pertain to the rights of women.

Male writer's participation in women's human rights discourse is illustrated in works like J. P Clark's *Song of a Goat* which presents Ebiere who is severely stigmatized by her childlessness. Living in a cultural society in which a childless woman is an incomplete human being, Ebiere in desperation resorts to a sexual relationship with her brother-in law in the effort to be a mother. Clark's authorial voice condemns the fact that in this patriarchal set up, a woman's humanity and right to existence is not recognized outside her duty of procreation. H. ObyOkolocha remarks that "it is interesting that Clark does not make the woman guilty. Zifa, her husband is the unproductive one and the playwright gives the woman the option of adultery without presenting her as evil" (115).

Allwell Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu describe Ahmed Yerima as "a gynandrist for whom the cause and experiences of the woman constitute a veritable material for literary

exploration”(197). They note that Yerima's *Aetu* condemns the traditional practice of inheriting women which cause women immense humiliation and pain and *The Wives* explores the bad sides of polygamy in which women always emerge as the losers (196). Affirming that Yerima is an advocate for women, Ikikelnieke Ufford asserts that Yerima's *The Portrait* stresses “the need for women to aspire to great heights without neglecting their duties as mothers. “The Portrait, thus stands out as a strong weapon on attitudinal control and perception” (qtd in Onukaogu and Onyerionwu, 197).

Confining the total value of a woman's life to motherhood as Clark depicts is also captured in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. Nnuego is worthless to her first husband -Amatokwu- because she is unable to bear him a child. Amatokwu is vicious when he tells Nnuego: “I cannot waste my precious male seeds on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line” (32). In the same novel, Ubani summarizes the roles of men and women in that traditional society. He states: “You are to give her children; she is to bear the children and look after you and them.” (31). The idea that a woman must serve some use to a man is seen when Amatokwu tells Nnuego: “But now, if you can't produce sons, at least, you can help harvest yams” (32), hence she virtually becomes a slave working in his farms thus stripping her of dignity and violating her right to happiness.

Even when the woman has children, her worth depends on the sex of her children. This is illustrated in the judgment given in the quarrel between Nnuego and her co-wife Adaku. Nnuego is obviously at fault but the elders admonish Adaku for upsetting the woman who has preserved her husband's immortality. It is ludicrous that the elders pronounce that, Adaku, a mother of only girls, “is committing an unforgivable sin” by being flamboyant and making Nnuego, the mother of her husband's sons jealous (166). Emecheta's protests against these injustices are articulated in her protest to God. She asks: “God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage” (186).

In the bid to dismantle the cultural practices that abuse the rights of women, Tracie Chima Utoh's *Our Wives Have Gone Mad Again* reverses the roles of the sexes in the home in favour of the woman. The husband, Inyang, is depicted as more of a houseboy than the traditional master of the home. On the other hand, Utoh presents the wife Eneas economically empowered and in a reverse of male chauvinism, Ene bullies Inyang. Utoh's play suggests that the economic empowerment of women can break the stronghold of patriarchal subjugation of women and eliminate the loopholes through which women's rights are abused.

Tess Onwueme's *Then She Said It* is a revolt against the abuse of the economic and social rights of the Nigerian woman. Iniobong Uko maintains that the play “reveals the complexity and diversity of the dynamics of female survival in the Nigerian (economic) environment. *Then She Said It* dramatizes the determination of the exploited, abused, and marginalized Niger-Delta women to survive”(160-161). The women in Onwueme's play are clearly determined to crush obstacles that marginalize them in the interactions that define society and deny them the right to benefit from societal resources. Similarly, J.P Clark's *The Wives Revolt* instigates a reform of the laws that deny women rights to benefit from communal economic resources. Okolocha posits that the women presented in *The Wives Revolt* “succeed in bringing about societal reforms through organized protest. They succeed in putting an end to the marginalization of women in sharing communal allocations and resource, women being the most affected segment of the society when it comes to sharing resources” (108).

Julie Okoh's concern with redressing the violation of women's human rights is longstanding. In the introductory notes to *In the Fullness of Time*, she states that her mandate as a writer is “to sensitize women about the need to know their rights and realize the outrageous havoc they do to themselves by adhering complacently to these obsolete customs and

traditions, which drain from them vitality and turn them into cripples” (xii). Similarly, Oyedepo has always been emphatic about women’s rights as she demonstrates in *The Rebellion of The Bumpy-Chested*. In this play, Oyedepo advocates among other issues that the structures and prejudices which have denied women the right to attain high level political positions such as Heads of State, Governors, and others must be dismantled (73). The Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo summarizes the African woman’s existence appropriately. She posits that the life of the African woman consists of waging heroic battles against the structures of negative tradition, muffling religion, overwhelmingly hostile natural forces and exploitative economic, social and political forces that seek to silence the woman completely (157).

Literary evidence affirms that culture, tradition and social practices such as domestic exploitation, stereotypes, bias, unequal opportunities in education and politics, early marriages/forced marriage, female circumcision, widowhood rituals, preference for male children and more combine to violate or deny the human rights of women in Nigerian society.

Culture and Women’s Human Rights

The discourse on women’s rights in *Edewede* and *Brain Has No Gender* is approached within the context of traditional Nigeria societies in which the woman’s life is constrained by a multitude of traditions, practices which violate her human rights and prevent her from achieving her full potential as a human being. Female circumcision is the major topic of Okoh’s *Edewede*. In the traditional village of Otoedo, the practice has been to circumcise the girl child in the early teenage years. Through the experiences of the protagonist, *Edewede*, Okoh argues that female circumcision is a death trap for the girl child whose life is often cut short as a result of the dangers arising from the ‘evil blade! The author begins her quest to eliminate this practice by presenting the audience with the two sides of the coin – the advantages of circumcision as perceived by traditional thought processes and the actual reality of it as illustrated in the play. The audience is given ample opportunities to weigh the perceived advantages and disadvantages on a scale.

Oyedepo’s *Brain* depicts the preference for male children, forced marriage and the refusal to educate the female child. Alani has seven wives and sixteen female children. He considers having only female children a curse from the gods and he does all in his power to remove the curse. This issue is so serious that in the effort to remove the curse, we are told that he had to feast on the faeces of pigs as advised by the medicine man, and endure the creepy sensation of having a toad in his pants so that his sperm might change to male forming ones (10). Ifalami the medicine man sympathizes with Alani, he asks: “Who does not know the importance of male children?” (111). Alani does not believe that female children can amount to anything, but he reluctantly sends Osomo to school because she is very brilliant. As soon as he arranges a marriage for her, he stops her from attending school. The forced marriage to Kelani – the old man – proves to be a disaster from the wedding night. Osomo runs away with the help of her teacher. She acquires an education and returns to the village years later as a medical doctor. She is the evidence that female children should be educated, that they will amount to something if they are given the opportunity. Osomo’s success in school and her emergence as a medical doctor proves that the intellect is not gendered.

(i) Female Circumcision

In Okoh’s *Edewede*, Ebikere insists on having her granddaughter, Oseme, circumcised in spite of the fact that she has already lost Izenebu, her older granddaughter and Oseme’s sister, to circumcision. Ebikere’s reason for strict adherence to this cultural practice is because “circumcision is part of our culture. My mother was circumcised. So were her grandmothers,

great grandmothers and great, great great-grandmothers. It is a rite that every woman in this land goes through”(2). The conflict between Ebikere and her daughter-in-law Edewe who is adamant that Oseme will not be circumcised because of the high risk to life and health culminate into a community crisis. Edewede and those who are against the cultural practice of circumcision become a threat to societal harmony and tradition. The threat they represent is such that Edewede is publicly repudiated by her husband and evicted from the village by a ritual masquerade. This act of public humiliation motivates the women into solidarity to fight for their basic rights. Like the women of Erhuwaren community in J.P. Clark's *The Wives Revolt*, the women of Otoedo abandon their homes and depart on self-exile in protest against the treatment of Edewede. Without the women, the community is unbalanced and the men are forced to find ways to resolve the conflict between traditional practices and change.

The old woman Ebikere represents traditional practices. She informs her granddaughter Oseme that “circumcision is a thing of joy, prestige and cultural identity” (6). She tries to prepare Oseme's mind for the exercise. She states:

Your bravery in the camp of circumcision will be the pride of your family and lineage. You are from a family of a brave warrior. Ah! The descendant of Edokparu, the Ogbomhagbesin, revered far and wide in Otoedo land for his military prowess. Oh yes, you will be brave. (3)

Ebikere alerts the audience and her granddaughter to the fact the procedure for circumcision as it is carried out in Otoedo land is a painful exercise. She does not speak of any benefit that the child will derive from it nor does she give a good reason for the exercise. Instead, the girl Oseme is advised that she must undergo the procedure bravely to make her family proud. The only reason given for the push to get Oseme to participate in the gruesome ritual where assistances have to hold their legs apart forcibly for the operation to be performed is to uphold tradition and promote family pride (3). The girl child is reminded that she is the descendant of a brave warrior and so, must display the bravery of her ancestors. To justify the pain she will suffer, Ebikere insists: “My child, happiness and sorrow go hand in hand like day and night. That is the pattern of life itself”(5).Ebikere's insistence on the preservation of this traditional practice despite the fact that she has already lost a grandchild to it indicates that for her, tradition, no matter how useless is more valuable than the individual or human life. It is outrageous that the only benefit of taking the risk of irrevocable death is to promote family pride and uphold tradition. The death of Izenebu, (Ebikere's granddaughter) and all others who have died as a result of circumcision amount to a senseless waste of human lives and a denial of the right to life.

Edewede represents the transformation of dysfunctional traditional practices. She is the vehicle through which the playwright educates the women on the reality of the circumcision exercise. She asks her mother-in-law:

What about those girls who do not return to the village and are never even mourned, after bleeding to death? Regarded as sacrifice, they are left behind for the vultures to feed on. Tell her also about those girls who do not live long enough to see the days of their marriage and motherhood because of the infection contacted through the operation. (5)

We realize that a good number of young girls die in the process from infection. The situation is made even more horrible by the fact that the girls that die are not mourned or accorded the honour of a burial. Traditional society conceives of each one that dies in the process as a sacrifice and they are therefore left for vultures to feed on. The waste of promising young girls seems so senseless when the reason is merely family pride and tradition. Edewede remembers that circumcision has brought tears to her eyes several times (6). She lost her older daughter, Izenebu, to circumcision. Her sister Azelu has died from the complications and her childhood

friends Akalo and Denowe had bled to death after the ritual and so many more (19). The audience is made aware that even when the consequence is not death, there are numerous other consequences such as Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF), which damages the girls genitals. Often enough, damage to the tissues of her private parts may also result in the narrowing of the birth canal creating many other problems during childbirth and after (29). Eriala, the nurse in the play, testifies:

Many women are suffering from different types of diseases because of circumcision: Tetanus, urinary infections, V.V.F., HIV/AIDS are all dangerous afflictions contacted through circumcision. Women! Do you know the exact reason they make you go through with it? Do you know what harm you do yourselves by agreeing to do it? (36)

The major reason given for the practice is the belief that it curbs the sexuality of girls/women rendering them incapable of promiscuity. We are told:

The custodians of our customs [men] and traditions claim that your peanut is the source of confusion and impurity. So they carve it out of its pod to prevent you from having impure thoughts. But women! For once in your life, stop and think. Think for yourselves.... Do you think with your brain or bottom? Do you see with your heart or bottom? Do you desire with your heart or bottom? (37)

The nurse urges the women to evaluate the logic behind the circumcision exercise. She is the author's voice of self-awareness and perception. The market women begin to realize that there is a great deal of sense in her logic. They re-evaluate the issue; they recall several instances where women have been promiscuous after circumcision. The women remember Aimufia who "was circumcised but how many times was she caught sneaking behind her husband to sleep with other men?" (38), they remind themselves of others like Aimufia and awareness comes. They reach the logical understanding that circumcision does not prohibit sexual laxity. Hence, the third market woman asks: "If circumcision does not prevent promiscuity, why then do they make us go through it?" (38). Hence the myth that circumcision curbs sexuality, thereby reducing sexual immorality is proved to be false.

The dramatist initiates the process of transformation by establishing that in reality, circumcision serves no purpose at all. She goes further to create the consciousness that women have the right to enjoy sex as well as men. The nurse asks the women: "Do you forbid enjoyment? If it is cut off, the woman is unable to enjoy sex. She becomes a mere vessel for man's pleasure. Women! Are you bowls, pots or mortars to be used and thrown to the corner, until the next time around?" (38). It becomes obvious that the patriarchal structure of traditional society instituted and maintained the practice for the sole benefit of the man. The myth of curbing sexuality was so that the men would have wives who were strictly faithful while they could do as they pleased and have as many wives as they wished. In that circumstance, the woman is merely a toy for a man's pleasure and convenience. In addition, the physical pain it involves, the health consequences and instances of death that occur often are all to give the man advantages over the woman. Clearly, evidence indicates that the practice of circumcision does not provide any advantage, so a continuation of the practice seems illogical. The dramatist leaves us in no doubt that this practice violates the woman's right to happiness and sexual pleasure. It is also a denial of her fundamental right to life and health as the practice often results in death and numerous health complications. Establishing these violations of women's rights in text is an advocacy for the redress of issues highlighted.

(ii) Forced Marriage

The Nigerian traditional societies depicted in *Edewede* and *Brainare* patriarchal societies in which the woman's life is defined by the man as the principal representative of culture.

Certain privileges are accorded to the man as the patriarch, husband and father. As the patriarch and head of the family, the man has the right to decide the fate of the members of his family. Hence in *Brain*, Osomo's father, Alani, marries her off to the Octogenarian Kelani against her will. In this traditional social structure, it is his right as the head of the family and her father to choose a husband for his daughter. As is often the case, the husband chosen for a daughter is for the benefit of the entire family; the benefit for the girl or her wishes is not taken into consideration. Osomo's father does not even think that she is entitled to know that she is getting married. At the request of the prospective bridegroom that Osomo should be informed of the marriage plans, her father is infuriated. He asks: "Why do we need to tell her? Am I not her father? She is a bastard if she doesn't obey me. Has she two heads? How will she refuse a husband I have chosen for her?" (31).

The aged Kelani gives the following reason: "I am asking because children of nowadays... because of their education, they want their consent to be sought?" (32). Alani will have none of such talk! He insists:

Unless a father is not worth his salt. No daughter of mine dare to oppose my wishes. I have suffered enough from the curse of having female children. I want to marry them off as soon as they see their first period. I am not happy seeing them fill up my house like alligator-pepper seeds fill up their pod... (32)

It is noteworthy that Osomo breaks Kelani's testicles on their wedding night rather than allow him to touch her. This act of physically incapacitating her husband is symbolic of the breakdown of the absolute power of the husband over his wife; Kelani is now effectively useless as a husband, the instrument of oppression has been destroyed. This prominent refusal to adhere to an unfavourable tradition is an act of liberation from the injustice of cultural practices. Implicit in this action is the playwright's encouragement that women in situations that constrain and abuse their rights must do whatever is necessary to extricate themselves from these circumstances. Oyedepo institutes the act of smashing the man's testicles as a dismantling of the practice of forced marriages. We are told that "maiming one's husband's organ and rendering it useless is unheard of ..." (36). This alien 'unheard of' action is designed to transform old practices and maybe, usher in more equitable marriage practices.

The issue of the man's absolute power to choose his daughter's husband in patriarchal society also crops up in *Edewede*. For having the audacity to entertain thoughts of choosing her own husband, Edewede's mother scolds her: "... You should be ashamed of yourself. A girl rejecting the spouse chosen for her by her father. Unheard of!" (27). The woman is expected to make do with any man chosen for her no matter how old he is, how incompatible they are or how repulsive he might be to her. The woman's happiness is obviously not a consideration in the choice of a husband. She is sentenced to what might turn out to be a lifetime of unhappiness which is a denial of her basic right to happiness.

In addition, the woman's life is constrained by a multitude of biases into which she has been socialized from birth. She is someone's daughter, wife or sister. These positions have been so internalized that women cherish them. Edewede is progressive and wishes to keep up with the changing times yet she cherishes her position as Ordia's wife. She kneels to serve him food, to discuss important things with him or offer him an apology (12). She assures Ordia: "I consider myself very lucky to have a husband like you" (24). As she advocates for a change in the structures that violate the rights of women, she pleads with her husband: "I'll want to still sit high in your mind, no matter what happens" (25). Often, the socialization of women in patriarchal cultures is so deeply ingrained that they resist attempts to improve their circumstances. In *Edewede*, the playwright asks in exasperation: "How do you educate a people that see every new idea as a threat to traditions?" (30). Hence some of these abuses and

violations remain unacceptable or unperceived by both the violators and those violated. That women are essentially enslaved by their socialization is affirmed in the practices discussed in the plays. Also implicit is the idea that women have to break out of the confines of their socialization to effect transformations in the cultural practices and attitudes that violate their basic human rights.

(iii) Women's Education

Oyedepo's *Brain Has No Gender* voices a strong argument against the violation of the woman's right to education. Alani has sixteen female children and he has sent only one – Osomo – to school because she shows unusual brilliance. Soon enough, he stops her from attending school because he has given her away in marriage without her knowledge or consent. More importantly, Alani considers it a waste of money to educate female children. He asks: "What is the use of a woman's education? Is she not going to waste it in the kitchen?" (30). This odious belief that it is a waste of time and money to educate the female child is only one of the numerous traditional beliefs that are negatively prejudiced against women. Oyedepo states that these prejudices are intended to "keep women perpetually relegated to the background" (3).

The dramatist places a high premium on education as the means through which the woman will emerge "from the path of darkness and ignorance" (4). The 3rd voice in the play insists that women must "Force open the door of knowledge. Education will liberate us from suppression. Education shall lift the veil of ignorance from the eyes of all women. Women must go through life with greater visibility!" (4).

Education is seen as the route to freedom from societal injustices, and will bring the opportunities for women to be more active and visible in spheres of social interaction. Oyedepo takes time to evaluate the issues through the dialogue between the young male and female university undergraduates. Jide, the young man, posits that a man's intellectual superiority is widely established in the world. He reminds his female colleague Funmi:

Come on Funmi. I think you women are becoming rather swollen headed. Now think of scientific inventions and discoveries of monumental significance, was there any one made by a woman? Isaac Newton, Benjamin Franklin, John Thomson and most of the world's great scientists were men. (41)

Funmi has a more realistic, forceful argument. She asks:

But the question is, can't women do it? Were these discoveries and inventions made with male organs? Pardon my vulgar language. Now, are you trying to prove that the possession of a male organ is an index of a higher mental capability? I am saying emphatically, that the brain has no gender.

But Jide is unconvinced and refuses to entertain any notion of women's intellectual equality. To buttress her point, Funmi points out that even the human anatomy teaches a simple lesson of human equality irrespective of gender. She states:

It's surprising that men find it difficult to accept that they aren't superior to women. Now... look at the human anatomy. You will observe that what exists on pairs have equal status in nature's scheme. Our two eyes or two ears, legs, etc convey the symbolic message of parity. So in essence, the two sexes, male and female should therefore be conceived as equals and partners. (43)

She makes the point that part of the reason why women do not make visible contribution to science and society is because they have not been given equal opportunities as men (44). The playwright raises awareness of this lack of opportunities, of the unsavoury positions women are relegated to. The 5th female voice asks: "How many of us are governors? How many of us are

statesmen or are permitted to use the word statesmen? How many of us are great scientists and inventors?" (3). Women are aware that they have been denied opportunities to occupy these positions through the denial of education. Lack of female education is a result of cultural prejudices against the woman. However, they resolve: "We shall get there" (3).

The dialogue between women leaves us in no doubt that the women are determined to find their way out of their confined spaces.

1st Voice: Women, we need to steer ourselves from the path of darkness and ignorance.

2nd voice: Yes, we need to gain more dignity. How do we do it?

3rd Voice: I think I have the answer.... Education shall liberate us from suppression...

4th Voice: Yes we agree. Education shall rescue us. We too shall join the men in exploring the depths of knowledge.

5th Voice: But can we do it?

6th Voice: Women yes, we have the grey matter to cope. The human brain does not have gender differentiation. ... A woman's brain does not function less than a man's...

7th Voice: Women let us rise to the challenge. We can do it! And we shall do it! (4-5)

These seven women activate their right to education and the story of Osomo proves that education will indeed liberate the women from the confines of culture. Osomo's escape from forced marriage liberates her, and her return many years later as a qualified medical doctor proves to her father and all that indeed 'brain has no gender'.

(iv) Preference for Male Children

The woman's situation in the societies depicted in these plays has been so marginalized by the structures of society that she has suffered several forms of human rights abuses. Yet another example of such abuses is that even the woman's role of motherhood is graded according to the sex of the child. In *Brain*, Alani does not consider female children as a sign of virility. He is sorely aggrieved that his wives have not given him a male child. He questions the seer:

I tell you Baba, mine has been an unusual ill-luck. It isn't that I'm impotent. ... Baba, is it not a bitter irony that I, the same one whose masculine power is stronger than that of a horse should father sixteen female children with no male child, no single male child, not even a premature one as evidence of my potency? (10)

When the seer prophesies that Alani's pregnant wife, Awele, will soon be delivered of triplets – all boys- he is overjoyed. He foresees that his enemies and those who have laughed at him will bury their heads in shame. The anticipation of three male children at one go means that he has "triumphed over his enemies" (20) and his pride is restored. He gloats prematurely: "Me, Alani, the son of buffalo, the son of the fighting elephant...!" (20). When the babies turn out to be girls, he is vicious in his disappointment. His wife Awele is urgently in need of blood after the birth of girl triplets. At the request of the nurse that he should donate blood to his ill wife, he bluntly refuses. His position is clear as he tells the nurse:

Look nurse, if you want to save Awele's life, save it... I do not think I can donate blood. Let me say this, Awele is not coming back to my house. I strongly suspect she is a witch. No medicine works with her... when Awele leaves here let her go to her father's house. That's all. Her triplets are her trouble o! I don't have any hand in it o! (22)

Rating sons above daughters in patriarchal society also features in *Edewede*. Edewede's mother-in-law regards her as barren because she does not have a male child. She fumes: "How many men in this village treat their wives like he [her son] does? Others in his place would have since married another woman. His homestead is empty, yet he calls you: "my wife!" Go away! Barren woman!"(8) Edewele insists that she is not barren, that she has a daughter, Oseme, but Ebikere is unconvinced. She states: "Having only one issue is like having none at all. And a girl too (Hissing).Chiew! Nonsense!"(8). It is important to note that Edewede has had two sons who died. She actually lost one of her sons to superstition. She recalls:

I have had male issues. My first son was bitten to death by a snake in your plantation. Six years ago, I had another baby boy. He cried. Mama, I heard him cry. But nobody came to his rescue. They said he was an evil child for he wore the cord around his neck like a necklace. I would have died too, while waiting for the medicine man to come and separate me from him. But God saved me. (8)

The danger of ignorance and superstition is demonstrated in the practice of leaving perfectly healthy, normal children to die for the simple accident of being born with the umbilical cord around their necks. It is a gross denial of their basic rights to life.

These plays show that traditional culture does not ascribe any noticeable social rights to the women. The position of the woman is from birth secondary to that of the man. The woman who has had only female children is distraught with anxiety and afraid that her husband may discontinue the marriage. She has no voice. Even the one who has male children does not have much of a voice. Ebikere reminds Edewede that she is "only a wife in this house" (7). That men and women are "born free and equal in dignity and rights" is not in evidence in the socio-cultural setting of both plays. The human rights concept of "inalienable rights" is perpetually violated as these issues illustrate.

Instigating Transformations

Okoh and Oyedepo set wheels to transform the practices that are inimical to women's progress into motion. They do these in various ways. Okoh questions the logic behind the practice of circumcision. She provides evidence to show that the perception of circumcision as a means of curbing sexual immorality among women is only a myth. She debunks the myth through a scientific explanation establishing that circumcision serves no purpose. This makes it imperative to abolish the practice because of the dangers it constitutes to women's life and health. In what amounts to a basic lecture in health education, Okoh explains health situations such as HIV, and VVF, which are often contacted through circumcision. These explanations bring awareness of how dangerous the practice really is, motivating both men and women to condemn and reject the practice. It is also worthy of note that when Edewede is publicly repudiated by her husband and the ritual masquerade, the women are united in solidarity with her. It is the community represented by the masquerade versus the women led by Edewede. Implicit in their oath of solidarity, their restitution and the abolition of the circumcision exercise is that women must come together as one strong force to fight for their rights. The cliché, "united we stand" holds true here.

In addition, Edewede debunks some other superstitions that have made the woman's life difficult in traditional society. She makes the women of Otoedorealize that a child that is born with his/her umbilical cord around the neck is perfectly normal, not evil as superstition would have them believe. Thus, it is illustrated that the practice of leaving such children to die was a terrible waste of humanity. This obnoxious practice becomes unacceptable and positions the

society for a transformation of this attitude. *Edewede* summarizes it thus: "Ignorance is worse than any disease" (8).

Similarly, Oyedepo instigates reforms to the areas in which women are marginalized and are not accorded rights at all. *Brain* is a convincing demonstration that women and men are equal intellectually. As Josephine Donovan puts it: "Intellect is not sexed;...strength is not sexed, and ...our views about the duties of men and the duties of women, the spheres of man and the sphere of woman, are mere arbitrary opinions" (31-32). So against the odds of traditional beliefs, practices and biases in favour of men, *Osomo* is a demonstration that the division of men and women into public and private domains is without justification. The idea that a woman's education would be wasted in the kitchen—the arena to which she is assigned by culture, is projected as invalid and unfair to the woman. *Osomo* vindicates the intellectual capacity of the woman when she becomes a medical doctor, an indication of intellectual excellence. Alani is forced to acknowledge that a daughter is as good as a son. There is a revision of attitudes, a change of perception. He agrees that *Osomo* is "a child in a million. A daughter who has done what a thousand sons could not do" (52). The old attitudes towards women are being transformed in text and by implication, in society. Since literature is a mirror of society, it is the emergence of a new era. Alani's new perception is the advent of transformation. In regret for his mistakes in the past, he declares:

I am going to feast in this house for twenty-one years to compensate for my years of mourning. I have mourned and mourned that God didn't give me a male child. Is *Osomo* not greater than a hundred men? A doctor...a doctor. Now, I am a most happy man. I thank my creator. (53)

Osomo is the example that is held up for other women to follow. She is also the playwright's statement that women must be courageous enough to extricate themselves from the prison of cultural practices. *Osomo's* rejection and the extreme action of breaking her husband's testicles on their wedding night also illustrates the opinion that those affected must take matters into their hands to effect changes to their circumstances. The action of liberating herself physically is the threshold of change in *Osomo's* life. In addition to the breakdown of the structure of forced marriages, it marks the beginning of the entrenchment of other human rights in her life. The education she acquires situates her in the position to receive societal respect and recognition as a worthy individual and also enables her to contribute meaningfully to society as a medical doctor. Her right to participate in the socio-economic affairs of her society on an equal footing is thereby achieved. Breaking *Kelani's* testicles can also be stretched to question perceptions of masculinity and power. Is a man's masculinity centred in his testicles? Is that his seat of power?

Conclusion

Nigerian female dramatists show a consistent preoccupation with traditional practices that abuse the rights of women and impede the development of Nigerian women. *Edewede* and *Brain Has No Gender* highlight and evaluate some of the issues that contemporary Nigerian female playwrights seek to redress through their creativity. The issues of female circumcision, forced marriage, the girl child's education and preference for male children discussed in the plays raise a lot of questions. What rights do women have in the traditional societies depicted in the texts? Are these rights protected, compromised or violated? What is the basis of male superiority? If *brain* is not gendered as the play insists, and the essential biological difference between the sexes is so vulnerable that a blow, or kick from a young girl can disable it, then what and where is the seat of masculine power? This means that the real factors that institute or enable the violations of women's human rights are culturally constructed and rigged in favour of the man. The plays illustrate that patriarchal Nigerian culture pays no attention to social inequities and women's human rights are perpetually violated by cultural practices and a

multitude of biases against them, hence female dramatists script visions committed to providing options for correcting this situation.

Okoh recognizes that female playwrights use their “creative writing to develop in their fellow women a sense of self-awareness and self-actualization so they can participate advantageously in contemporary global economy” (Okoh 2005, 117). Okoh and Oyedepo script transformations in the socio-cultural practices that violate the rights of women. In these plays, these practices are abolished successfully, women are made to overcome the limitations that constrain their existence and abuse their rights. It is noteworthy that the men in society also embrace the processes of societal reform. We are left in no doubt that change is inevitable hence the fourth elder in *Edewede* states: “tendency to resist change is a common trait in man. But sooner or later, change will come despite all resistance” (62). In discussing the social and cultural practices that violate the rights of women in *Edewede* and *Brain*, the playwrights explore the options for correction. Transforming the situations of women’s rights abuses, and eliminating the social structures that constrain women in the plays is a definite advocacy for human rights. These plays are therefore employed as a platform from which to redress violations, and entrench the human rights of women.

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