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GENDER DISPLACEMENT IN SELECTED NIGERIAN PLAYS

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Abstract

This study examined the representation of gender displacement in selected Nigerian plays, with particular focus on the marginalization of women within patriarchal social structures. Nigerian drama has long reflected societal realities in which cultural traditions and male dominance often place women in subordinate positions. The study adopted a qualitative research design and employed textual content analysis of Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*, J. P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*, and Ahmed Yerima's *Jakadiya*. The analysis focused on significant scenes, dialogues, character interactions, dramatic actions, and conflicts relating to social, cultural, economic, political, and psychological dimensions of gender displacement. The study was anchored on Feminist Theory and Womanism. Feminist Theory provided a framework for examining patriarchal oppression, female subordination, denial of autonomy, and gender inequality, while Womanism emphasized the experiences of African women within family, cultural, and communal structures. The analysis revealed that *Wedlock of the Gods* portrays Ogwoma's displacement through forced marriage, cultural expectations, and the denial of her freedom to determine her emotional and marital life. *The Wives' Revolt* dramatizes women's economic and social exclusion through unequal communal resource distribution and depicts their collective resistance against male domination. In *Jakadiya*, Bilikisu's experiences of slavery, sexual objectification, reproductive control, and exclusion within the royal institution demonstrate the intersection of gender, social status, and institutional power. Across the three plays, women are presented not only as victims of discrimination, exclusion, and cultural oppression but also as agents who resist, negotiate, and challenge oppressive structures. The study further found that Nigerian dramatists reconstruct female identity by portraying women as capable of exercising agency and participating in social transformation. It concludes that Nigerian drama functions not only as a reflection of gender inequality but also as an instrument of social criticism and transformation. Through dramatic representation of oppression and resistance, the selected

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plays promote gender consciousness and advocate dignity, justice, empowerment, recognition, and equal participation for women in society.

Keywords: Gender Displacement, Nigerian Drama, Feminism, Patriarchy, Womanism.

Introduction

Gender displacement refers to the marginalization, exclusion, or denial of opportunities experienced by individuals, especially women, as a result of socially constructed gender roles and expectations. In many African societies, including Nigeria, patriarchal traditions have historically placed men in positions of authority while assigning women subordinate roles within the family and the wider society. These socially prescribed roles often limit women's participation in politics, education, religion, the economy, and leadership. Nigerian drama reflects these realities by portraying women who struggle against cultural expectations, discrimination, and institutional barriers that restrict their freedom and opportunities.

In the early development of Nigerian drama, many plays written by male playwrights presented women as passive, dependent, and largely confined to domestic responsibilities. Their identities were often defined by their relationships with male characters, reinforcing traditional beliefs about women's roles in society. Over time, however, Nigerian drama has undergone significant transformation. Contemporary playwrights have increasingly challenged these conventional portrayals by creating female characters who are independent, resilient, and capable of questioning oppressive social structures. Through their stories, these dramatists reveal the challenges women face in areas such as marriage, culture, politics, and economic life while emphasizing their courage, determination, and capacity to resist injustice. Against this background, this study examines the representation of gender displacement in selected Nigerian plays. It explores how playwrights depict the experiences of women within patriarchal societies and investigates the cultural, social, political, and economic conditions that contribute to their marginalization. The study also analyzes the strategies adopted by female characters to challenge oppression, reclaim their identities, and assert their rights. Furthermore, it considers how contemporary Nigerian dramatists have redefined female identity by presenting women as active participants in social change rather than passive victims of tradition. Ultimately, the study seeks to demonstrate that Nigerian drama serves not only as a reflection of societal realities but also as an important medium for promoting gender equality, social justice, and transformative social consciousness.

Conceptual Review

Gender Displacement

Gender displacement is a situation where the traditional or expected roles, identities or position of one gender are shifted, challenged or replaced because of social, economic,

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political and or technological changes. Eni and Adjeketa (2024) see it as the unequal treatment, exclusion, or marginalization of individuals because of their gender, In literature and theatre gender displacement occurs when a character performs or assumes the role, identity, or social position typically associated with another gender. This may be done to question stereotypes, create dramatic effect or highlight inequality. In patriarchal societies, women are often denied equal rights and opportunities due to cultural beliefs, and that place men above women Eziechine & Agho, (2023). This displacement may occur socially, economically, politically, psychologically, or culturally.

Women may be excluded from leadership positions, denied inheritance rights, forced into marriages, or restricted to domestic roles. But Suswam and Chikada, (2025) argue that in Nigerian society, these inequalities are reinforced by customs, religious practices, and traditional values that prioritize male authority. Nigerian drama mirrors these societal realities by presenting female characters who suffer oppression and struggle for recognition. The concept of gender displacement is therefore important in understanding how women's identities and freedoms are suppressed within patriarchal systems.

Nigerian Drama and Gender Representation

Drama serves as a reflection of societal experiences and values. Ukwen (2015) is of the view that, Nigerian drama has historically portrayed women according to patriarchal expectations, often depicting them as passive, emotional, submissive, and dependent on men. In many traditional plays, women exist mainly as wives, mothers, or daughters whose identities revolve around male characters. Such portrayals reinforce societal stereotypes about women's inferiority Eni & Adjeketa, (2024). However, Eziechine and Esene (2023) believe that contemporary Nigerian dramatists, especially female playwrights, have challenged these representations by presenting women as educated, independent, courageous, and capable of resistance. Modern Nigerian drama increasingly focuses on women's struggles against oppression, domestic violence, forced marriage, and political exclusion. Through these dramatic representations, playwrights seek to expose gender inequality and promote social transformation.

Feminism and Womanism in African Literature

These are two important critical frameworks used to analyze how African writers represent women, gender relations and social justice. Although they share the same goal of improving women's lives, they differ in emphasis. According to Tong (2018), feminism is a movement and literary theory that advocates equal rights and opportunities for women while challenging systems of patriarchy and oppression. In literature, feminism examines how women are represented and seeks to dismantle stereotypes that limit female identity. African feminism, however, differs from Western feminism because it recognizes the importance of culture, family, and communal relationships within African societies Ogunyemi, (1985). Walker (1983) posited that, womanism emerged as an African-centered ideology that emphasizes

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cooperation between men and women while still promoting women's empowerment. Unlike radical feminism, womanism does not seek conflict between genders but encourages harmony and mutual respect. In Nigerian literature, feminist and womanist writers use drama to challenge oppressive traditions and advocate for women's dignity, education, and participation in society Eziechine and Esene, (2023). These ideologies provide important frameworks for analyzing gender displacement in Nigerian drama.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Feminist Theory and Womanism as its major analytical frameworks because both theories provide important perspectives for examining the representation of gender displacement in Nigerian drama. These frameworks help explain the nature of women's oppression in patriarchal societies and reveal the different ways female characters struggle for freedom, dignity, and recognition. Since the selected plays focus on women's experiences within traditional and modern Nigerian society, Feminist Theory and Womanism are suitable approaches for understanding the cultural, social, political, and psychological dimensions of gender displacement (Tong, 2018; Walker, 1983).

Feminist Theory

According to Tong (2018), feminist Theory is a critical approach that examines the ways women are oppressed, marginalized, and discriminated against in society. The theory challenges patriarchal structures that place men in positions of authority while limiting women's opportunities and freedoms. Feminism argues that many societies have historically been organized in ways that privilege men and subordinate women through laws, customs, religion, education, and cultural traditions. As a result, women are often denied equal participation in politics, leadership, economic activities, and decision-making processes.

In literature, Feminist Theory analyzes how female characters are represented and how literary texts reinforce or challenge gender inequality. Feminist critics are concerned with exposing stereotypes that portray women as weak, emotional, dependent, or inferior to men. They also examine how women's voices are silenced in literary works and how female experiences are neglected or misrepresented. According to Tyson (2015), through feminist criticism, literature becomes a tool for questioning oppression and advocating social change.
Eziechine and Esene (2023), say in Nigerian drama, Feminist Theory is particularly relevant because many dramatic works reflect patriarchal traditions that limit women's autonomy and identity. In traditional plays, women are often represented as submissive wives, obedient daughters, or victims of cultural practices such as forced marriage, widowhood rituals, and economic dependency. Female characters are frequently denied the power to make decisions concerning their own lives.
For example, in *Wedlock of the Gods*, Ogwoma is denied the freedom to choose her marriage partner because family and cultural expectations are prioritized over her personal desires

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Sofola, (1972). Feminist Theory helps explain how patriarchal traditions reduce women to objects of exchange and deny them individual agency. Similarly, in *The Wives' Revolt*, women resist oppression by organizing collective action against male exploitation Clark, (1980). Feminist criticism interprets this resistance as a rejection of patriarchal control and a demand for equality and recognition.

Furthermore, Feminist Theory highlights the importance of female empowerment and self-expression. Contemporary Nigerian female dramatists use drama as a medium for challenging stereotypes and reconstructing women's identities. Instead of portraying women as passive victims, modern feminist plays present them as educated, courageous, independent, and capable of leadership Ukwen, (2015). Feminist Theory therefore provides a useful framework for understanding how Nigerian drama exposes gender inequality while advocating women's liberation and social justice.

Womanism

Womanism is another important framework used in this study because it focuses specifically on the experiences of African women within their cultural and communal environments. The term Womanism was introduced by Walker (1983) to describe a form of feminism that recognizes the unique realities of Black and African women. Unlike Western feminism, which sometimes emphasizes confrontation between men and women, Womanism promotes cooperation, family unity, and communal progress while still addressing women's oppression.

Womanism emerged because many African scholars believed that Western feminist theories did not fully address the realities of African women. African societies are shaped by cultural traditions, colonial history, religion, and communal living, which influence the experiences of women differently from those in Western societies Ogunyemi, (1985). Womanism therefore seeks to protect African cultural identity while also challenging harmful practices that oppress women.

One major aspect of Womanism buttressed by Walker (1983) is its emphasis on complementarity between men and women rather than conflict. Womanists believe that both genders should work together for the development of society. The theory acknowledges the importance of motherhood, family relationships, and community values while advocating respect, dignity, and equal opportunities for women.

In Nigerian drama, Womanism is relevant because many female characters struggle to balance personal freedom with cultural expectations and family responsibilities. For instance, in *Jakadiya*, Bilikisu's suffering reflects the oppression women experience within royal and cultural institutions Yerima, (2017). A womanist interpretation examines not only her displacement but also the broader social structures that sustain inequality.

Womanism is also evident in the works of contemporary Nigerian female dramatists who portray women as resilient, nurturing, and socially conscious individuals. Their dramatic

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works often encourage dialogue, understanding, and gradual social transformation rather than violent confrontation Ukwen, (2015).

Gender Displacement in Nigerian Drama

Gender displacement is a major theme in Nigerian drama, reflecting the marginalization and oppression of women within patriarchal societies. Many Nigerian playwrights portray women as victims of cultural practices such as forced marriage, inheritance discrimination, political exclusion, and economic dependency, highlighting how these traditions restrict women's rights and opportunities Eni and Adjeketa, (2024) Eziechine and Agho, (2023).

In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Zulu Sofola depicts Ogwoma as a victim of cultural expectations that deny her the freedom to choose her marriage partner, illustrating women's lack of autonomy in traditional society Sofola, (1972). Similarly, Ahmed Yerima's *Jakadiya* portrays Bilikisu's emotional and social displacement within a patriarchal royal institution, exposing the inequalities embedded in traditional structures Yerima, (2017).

Contemporary Nigerian drama, however, increasingly presents women as agents of resistance and empowerment. In *The Wives' Revolt*, J. P. Clark portrays women who challenge male domination through collective action, demonstrating their determination to achieve equality and social justice Clark, (1980). Ukwen (2015) is of the view that modern female dramatists also redefine women's identities by portraying them as educated, independent, and capable leaders rather than passive victims.

Overall, Eziechine and Esene (2023) agree that Nigerian drama serves as both a reflection of gender inequality and a platform for advocating women's empowerment, social justice, and the transformation of patriarchal attitudes.

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that gender displacement is a dominant theme in Nigerian drama, reflecting the marginalization and oppression of women within patriarchal societies. The selected plays show that women are often denied autonomy, excluded from decision-making, and subjected to social, cultural, economic, and psychological discrimination Eni and Adjeketa, (2024).

The findings support Feminist Theory, which argues that patriarchal structures privilege men while limiting women's rights, opportunities, and self-expression Tong, (2018). Female characters in the selected plays experience inequality through forced marriage, cultural restrictions, and economic dependence, demonstrating how drama exposes gender-based oppression.

The findings also align with Womanism, which emphasizes the experiences of African women within their cultural contexts while promoting cooperation, family stability, and social transformation rather than conflict between men and women Walker, (1983); Ogunyemi, (1985). This is evident in *The Wives' Revolt*, where women collectively resist oppression while seeking justice and community harmony Clark, (1980).

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Furthermore, the study finds that contemporary Nigerian dramatists increasingly portray women as strong, independent, and capable of challenging patriarchal traditions. These representations promote gender equality, female empowerment, and social justice, demonstrating that Nigerian drama is not only a reflection of societal realities but also a powerful instrument for social criticism and transformation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

i. Playwrights should continue producing plays that promote balanced and positive representations of women while challenging harmful gender stereotypes.
ii. Educational institutions should include more feminist and womanist Nigerian plays in their curricula to promote awareness of gender equality and social justice.
iii. Theatre practitioners should stage plays that address gender displacement and women's empowerment to educate audiences and encourage positive social change.
iv. Government and cultural organizations should support female playwrights through grants, sponsorships, and production opportunities to increase women's participation in the Nigerian theatre industry.
v. Researchers should conduct further studies on gender representation in Nigerian literature and theatre to expand scholarship and promote policies that support gender equality.

Conclusion

The study concludes that gender displacement is a significant theme in Nigerian drama, reflecting the effects of patriarchal traditions on women's lives and identities. The selected plays reveal how women experience social, cultural, economic, and political marginalization while also portraying their resilience and resistance to oppression. Contemporary Nigerian dramatists increasingly challenge traditional stereotypes by presenting women as empowered, independent, and active contributors to societal development. Therefore, Nigerian drama serves not only as a reflection of societal realities but also as a powerful medium for promoting gender equality, social justice, and positive social transformation.

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