

# Contemporary Realities in the Selected Plays of Femi Osofisan, Sam Ukala and Tess Onwueme

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**Abstract:** It has often been said that a writer's assumption, criticisms, and everything he or she writes about are a result of the society he or she has found himself or herself. Literature is a product of the society. No writer writes without reflecting the prevailing issues or problems bedeviling the society he or she comes from. This paper takes a look at the contemporary issues in the Nigerian (even African) polity that have received the attention of Femi Osofisan in *Who is Afraid of Solarin?* and *Women of Owu*; Sam Ukala in *Odour of Justice* and Tess Onwueme in *The Missing Face* and *Tell it to Women*. The major aim of this paper is to expose some of the prevailing issues in contemporary Nigeria. These issues have continued to cause major setbacks in the Nigerian polity. The paper has helped in opening the eyes of the readers and drawing their ears on the corruption and other vices perpetuated by the leaders, women and tricksters in our midst. The selected playwrights beam their critical lens on the contemporary realities in Nigeria through their adaptations of oral traditions in their works. It is concluded that the playwrights are very much at alert with their social realities and they expose these socio-political and cultural issues in Nigeria, especially, for positive change.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Realities, Socio-political, Cultural Issues, Women Liberation, Corruption

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## 1. Introduction

Apart from the preservation, observation or revision of oral tradition through the incorporation of traditional elements into their plays, modern African playwrights, especially Nigerian playwrights, use these features to comment on the socio-political issues prevalent in their society. According to Ngugi wa Thiong'o [15], a writer's assumptions, criticism, and everything that he or she writes about are a result of the society he or she has found himself or herself. The burden of this paper is to consider the relevant contemporary issues in the Nigerian polity that have received the attention of these studied playwrights.

The word "contemporary" in this study, means "belonging to the same age" or "living or occurring in the same period of time". "Reality" (Realities), on the other hand, means the quality or state of being actual or true. It also means the state of things as they are or appear to be. "Contemporary realities," therefore, refers to the state or condition of things as they were, are and will be. They are also issues in our present-day Nigeria as they are reflected in the plays studied, vis-à-vis the

adaptation of oral traditions in the works.

## 2. Orality in Literature and Contemporary Realities

As explained earlier, orality in literature reflects contemporary realities, especially in the twenty-first century. Dan Omatsola [7] in his study of Okiroro Festival of the Okere people, observes:

This study discovers that during the annual celebration, the people's sad emotions could be made to look ordinary and ridiculous. Its songs have therefore been created to mirror the present global economic recession and its effect on the socio-economic reality of the Nigerian society

Similarly, Wumi Raji [12] reveals that the plays "published mostly in the late seventies, throughout the eighties and nineties, till the present ... time collectively articulate a dialectical perspective of art and society, in the process projecting a passionate identification with the marginalised and exploited majority in the society". It is a fact that no

writer writes without reflecting his/her society in his or her work. In other words, the identity for the writer is in contemporary society. In it, he/she finds all the fundamental truths that form his vision and enable him or her to acquire even a prophetic insight into the evolution of society. According to Chinweizu et al. [4], society creates the material for art and consequently, art is for the service of man. For art and especially literature to be successful, therefore, the artist has a “professional responsibility to make his work relevant to his society and its concerns”. Chinua Achebe [1], too, clearly states the role of the writer:

It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant – like that absurd man in the proverbs who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flame....

J. N. Ogu [5] also shares this view. According to him, “the literature of a people invariably embodies their perception of their immediate environment or their vision of their society or world at large”. The playwright whose works are studied: Femi Osofisan, Tess Onwueme and Sam Ukala, are examples of the writers who have continued to write on topical issues in their various localities, religions and traditional backgrounds. These playwrights are Nigerians and they reflect the various socio-political dynamics of the country in their works. Nigeria, for example, is bedevilled by a catalogue of perennial problems such as mis-leadership, lack of public probity and economic mismanagement. It has become a normal practice for a vast majority of men and women in the corridors of political power to steal public funds, thereby destroying or sabotaging the economy with impunity. After many years of independence, a feeling of disillusionment set in as the political leaders made a mess of the “hard-won independence”. The political machinery is abused and manipulated for selfish ends. The few privileged people enrich themselves at the expense of the masses. The government becomes grossly corrupt and morally bankrupt and all these in turn influence the thematic pre-occupations of these playwrights. These playwrights’ desire is to fight for the marginalised masses and to create a better society for all to live in. In an interview with Muiyiwa Awodiya [2], Osofisan summarises the burning patriotic ideals of the writers of his generation as follows:

To use the weapon we have, our pen, our zeal and our eloquence – to awaken in our people the song of liberation. With our writing, we would wash away the stigma of inferiority, rouse our dormant energies, unmask the pests and traitors among us, preach the positive sermons. Our works would be a weapon in the struggle to bring our country to the foremost ranks of modern nations. Our songs would call for radical political alternatives.

### 3. Contemporary Realities in the Plays

Different contemporary realities are revealed by the playwrights in the selected plays: Tess Onwueme’s *Tell it to Women* [8], Femi Osofisan’s *Who is Afraid of Solarin?* [10],

Tess Onwueme’s *The Missing Face* [9], Femi Osofisan’s *Women of Owu* [11] and Sam Ukala’s *Odour of Justice* [14]. As pointed out above, modern Nigerian and even African playwrights expose the prevalent issues and conditions of their various backgrounds and experiences in their works. These issues, problems and experiences that have continued to plague the Nigerian nation are explained in this article, with reference to the selected five plays. Some of the contemporary realities range from religion and politics, to marital and social issues. Examples of religious themes are belief in the supernatural and rejection of one’s culture. Political themes include power tussle, corruption, injustice and embezzlements by political leaders. Social themes vary too from deceits, cultural alienation, wickedness of man and woman liberation. Marital problems are exemplified in abortion and infidelity.

### 4. Contemporary Religious Issues

Nigerians’ belief in the supernatural beings is common in all the plays studied. Beliefs are conventions, norms and values which a people adhere to in different situations of life. The worship of gods and ancestors, for instance, in African societies, still thrives up to the present age. The incorporation of this oral tradition in modern Nigerian drama is not only to preserve tradition, but also to show its relevance in modern-day Nigeria. In *The Missing Face*, for example, despite Ida Bee’s long contact with European way of life, she still knows the importance of African traditional religion. We see this when she tells her son that they need “a place where we can be whole ... a place that can fill the emptiness with kinship and the spirit of our ancestors” (4). Later, she rebukes her son, Amaechi, for his disregard towards traditional worship when he calls the image of the Ikenga a “thing”. Ida Bee responds bitterly: “How many times have I got to tell you that this object you call a ‘Thing’ is your legacy? It’s the split image of the ‘Ikenga’ of our people, and we’ll be whole again” (7). Similarly, among the Idu people in *Tell It to Women*, there is a strong belief in the gods: Ogwugwu, god of Iron, Onokwu the river goddess and the ancestors. The people believe in the power of these supernatural beings to inflict punishment on any erring member of the community. The people also have faith in the ability of these superior beings to protect them. This is why Sherifat tells Adaku, “The gods are kind to us. I know they will smile on us. How can our gods and ancestors close their ears to our pleas for better days?” (23).

In their religious quest, the Yoruba believe in the divinities, spirits and their ancestors, as intermediaries through which they can reach and appease the Supreme Being, Olodumare. This Yoruba traditional belief underlies the actions and attitudes of the characters in Osofisan’s two plays studied. This is why there are devotees and priests who lead the people in the worship of these deities. In *Who Is Afraid of Solarin?*, Baba Fawomi, the Ifa Priest, constantly calls the name of Orunmila, the god of divination and augury who, through his great feat of clairvoyance, could also avert illnesses, diseases, catastrophes and calamities, by showing

man the way out of his difficulties. In *Women of Owu*, the people believe in their god, Anlugba, for protection especially against their invaders. Unfortunately, however, the Owu people, according to Anlugba, fail to call him for help. He blames the women:

My words were clear enough, I thought!  
Whenever any grave danger threatens the land  
I said! Whenever some misfortune arrive  
Too huge for you to handle, run  
To my hill and pull my chain!  
How was it that no one remembered?

...  
Three times, I said! Call my name  
Three times, and I shall be back,  
Sword in hand, to defend you! (3-4)

Furthermore, the Yoruba deify some diseases because of the prevalence of epidemics in the land. Smallpox is one particular disease that they dread because of its death toll on human life which almost attains epidemic proportions. In order to curb the spread of this fearful disease, the Yoruba invented 'Soponna', the god of smallpox, who is supposed to be responsible for infecting people with the disease when not adequately appeased. In this connection, Osofisan transforms the dread which the Yorubas have for this disease, in *Who Is Afraid of Solarin?* to the person of Dr. Tai Solarin whom the corrupt councilors dread so much for his uprightness and incompatibility. The following conversation among the Council officials is a pointer to the above fact.

CHAIRMAN: It's not a joke. I have  
information from ... er, very  
reliable sources that he's coming  
here. If he's not here already.

CHIEF MAGISTRATE: Solarin?

CHAIRMAN: I don't know for sure. But  
someone has been sent from headquarters,  
and he's travelling  
incognito.

CHIEF MAGISTRATE: Incognito  
Soponna O! It must be Solarin. (10)

The playwright explains in the note that "Soponna is the Yoruba word for small pox, a dreaded disease".

Apart from the deities, Nigerians revere and worship the ancestors. They confidently resort to their forefathers to resolve all manners of problems for them. These ancestors may even punish them when these people go against their wishes. In *Odour of Justice*, Oje reminds the people of the danger of offending the ancestors, if Umogwun does not obey the rules of paying the traditional last respect to her late husband. According to him:

Yes, I think the woman ought to be at her  
husband's funeral. In her own interest, at least.  
So she can avoid the iron blow of our ancestors.  
We all know how fierce they can be when our  
tradition is fatted on. We all know that, like  
hunger, they strike a child in the presence of its  
mother. (139)

The belief in the ancestors is expressed further by Erelu, in

*Women of Owu*. She shows the need to perform her duty to the ancestors so that the bodies of the slain priests, princesses and men can be sent home to the ancestors. According to her:

Their bodies lie around  
in the rubble there, unburied. They and the other victims  
need someone to release their spirits and send them back  
safely home to the ancestors ... (62)  
And that  
... I'll do my duty, since  
You insist. But  
Even the ancestors know it's only my  
carriage  
Left now to sing to them. (63)

Ancestor worship is carried out in the form of the masquerade, festival and ritual. The masquerades are supposed to be ghost mummers of the dead ancestors from heaven who return to earth to solve the problems of the people left behind and also bless them with human and material resources. To show their closeness to the physical environment, the masquerades, for example, adapt the available local resources through their costume and other paraphernalia, by their voice and speech, and by the timing of their festival. Examples of these are found in *The Missing Face*, *Tell It to Women*, and *Odour of Justice*. The masquerade performances, festivals and rituals are still being celebrated in Nigeria today.

## 5. Contemporary Cultural Issues

Despite the belief in gods and ancestors, the playwrights decry another contemporary reality noticed among Nigerians: the rejection of one's native traditions and home country in preference to western life and home. In *The Missing Face*, Amaechi persuades his mother, Ida Bee, for them to go back to Milwaukee, in America. He says:

Only family I know is Milwaukee. We got Uncle Henry and Uncle Ron and Aunt Kathie and Aunt Gloria. They're my people. We know them. They know us. But nobody knows us here. We're strangers to them, and they're strangers to us. So, we don't belong here! Ma, let's go back to Milwaukee, where we belong. (4)

This is a complete denial and renouncement of one's identity. This is also evident in this modern age, especially among the youth. Nevertheless, every individual of African origin has an ancestral origin or family lineage up to this contemporary age. Odozi shows his surprise at Amaechi and his mother and, of course, the "children of nowadays". He says: "what is she talking about? ... You children of nowadays amuse me ... there is nothing one won't hear nowadays ... In this new world (Emphatically.) Enu Ofu! Ha, children! Oyibo has spoilt our land" (10). In recent times, people have deviated so much from African culture that has bound them together. Instead, as Momah explains:

We strive to turn Africa into modern Europe. We gonna make it. The big cities where no one cares about anybody, each person is his own person! Independence! Alone, with scope, freedom and opportunities to make it to the top alone

– away from this backward, burdensome African extended family system. Everyone nosing into everyone else's business each, the brother of so-and-so, mother of that great grandmother from this village and all that! Ugh! African ways are so long and burdensome. American ways, so "cool" and so fast! ... (29)

From Momah's statement above, his intention is to disengage himself from the Igbo culture which holds the people in unity. He does not want to be watched or have anything to do with the nuclear or extended family system as practised in the land. The language of the people, a symbol of unity too, is degraded by Momah, a representative of contemporary youths. They want to be identified with foreign tongues which signify "strange land" as noticed by Odozi. It is no longer the case of singing the Lord's song in a strange land but singing a strange song in our own land.

Coupled with the above is the reality of the modern man, represented by Momah who rejects his African or native name and prefers a foreign one. He believes that time has changed. This is why Momah calls himself "Jack" even when he does not know the meaning of the name. In the following conversation, Momah declares his name:

IDA BEE: You got any identification?

MOMAH: Student I. D

IDA BEE: Is this your name?

MOMAH: Yes.

IDA BEE: I've never heard of an African name, JACK.

MOMAH: Well, that's what I'm called, JACK.

IDA BEE: How many African brothers do you know that are called Jack?

MOMAH: Not many, but there must be some. Times have changed. New influences, new beliefs, new ways.

My name is JACK!

IDA BEE: Most African names have meaning.

What's the meaning of JACK?

MOMAH: Hmm ... Well, I don't know. Don't know really ...

em ... it's just a name. A name has no meaning.

What should I care about the meaning of a name, anyway? (26)

Ida Bee then challenges him, saying that most African names have meaning. For example, "Amaechi" means "Who knows tomorrow?", "Momah" means "The ancestors/gods know", "Odozi", "The one who mends", "Nebe" means "we watch the world" while Afuzue stands for "The eyes have seen it all". This implies that almost all African names have profound meanings. According to Ida Bee, it reveals a value system, a way of life, of peace, unity and justice.

Some individuals, owing to their long exposure and contact with Europeans, neither speak nor understand their native tongues or languages as in the case of Ida Bee and Amaechi. This is why Odozi could not stomach his anger as he rebukes them, "You look like us. You claim to be one of us. And yet you do not speak our tongue. You do not understand us ... because you speak Oyibo the white man's tongue" (29).

Onwueme exposes the African modern woman's rejection

of her culture in *Tell It to Women*. The two women, Ruth and Daisy, in their struggle for women liberation, denounce their tradition and people's way of life, and move to the city. While other characters in the play bear native names, they are the only two characters who prefer English names. They deride their native Idu village and the ways of life there. Having succeeded in taking Yemoja from the village to the city, the two women molest the village life and the so-called "village women". Daisy mocks Yemoja by calling her "QUEEN OF IDU!". She asks Yemoja, "You know where you are? This is THE CITY! CITY! Not the cave you call home in the village! (16). She and Ruth even speak American English to prove they have travelled out, but not to speak their own dialect. Examples of this are: "I'm gonna tell you!" (16), "The city ain't need no tail from rats like you 'cos your kind of tail too ugly ..." (16) and "I ain't giving no monkey no time to adjust its tail" (170).

## 6. Corruption in Contemporary Nigeria

Using the trickster motif, Femi Osofisan and Sam Ukala expose another contemporary reality in modern-day Nigeria in their plays, *Who Is Afraid of Solarin* and *Odour of Justice* respectively. This is corruption, with its antecedents of injustice, embezzlement, bribery and fraud. In his play, Osofisan paints a vivid picture of municipal corruption in Nigeria. The insignificant rogue, Isola Oriebora (the trickster par excellence), has jumped bail in Lagos and is mistaken for Solarin, a government appointed Public Complaints Commissioner (PCC), whose arrival is anticipated with panic by the corrupt local council officials. He is bribed and feted and finally betrothed to the daughter of the materialistic, corrupt pastor who wears charms around his waist.

Osofisan's thematic pre-occupation centres on the politicians and leaders of the people who parade themselves as the messiahs but are deceitful and pretentious. There is little idealism; rather, there is much greed, corruption and fraud. Flirtation, hypocrisy and bribery prevail. The characters in the play are used to expose the evils that pervade the political arena in contemporary Nigeria. For instance, the Councilor for Education gets his appointment by bribing. He says, "You know how much I paid for that appointment?" This shows that the vice of bribery starts from the top and percolates down to the least worker or employee in the office. Corruption is a deadly virus that has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigerian society. It is a phenomenon that can be found in every sector of national life, ranging from social, religious, and economic, to political. Its most predisposing factor is wanton greed. As defined by J. J. Senturia [13], corruption is the "misuse of public power for private gain".

Corruption has become a household word in Nigeria. It has tarnished the image of the country at the international level. Walter Carrington [6, 7] reveals that a survey of the fifty-four countries that engaged most in international business activities conducted by Transparency International, an anti-corruption watchdog organisation with its headquarters in

Berlin, Germany, found Nigeria to be the most corrupt nation in the world (Walter Carrington 6-7). In 1997, another survey which was conducted by the same organisation revealed Nigeria as the most corrupt. In 1999, however, Nigeria assumed the second position. In 2019, the survey revealed Nigeria to be the third most corrupt nation in the world. Corruption is, therefore, a major theme in *Who Is Afraid of Solarin?* where Osofisan condemns corruption and religious charlatans who see their political and religious positions as an opportunity to deceive and cheat those they come across.

Furthermore, the Councilor for Education embezzles the money for the execution of the UPE project and when he learns of the Commissioner's visit, he decides to have a few stalls destroyed so that a notice could be put up, to give the impression that work is in progress. Apart from her, the rumoured arrival of Solarin, an anti-corruption leader, crusader and PPC in a remote local government headquarters, makes the council chairman and his councillors gullibly take Isola Oriebora for Solarin. The corrupt officials decide to use every means, including divination and bribery, to escape the wrath of Solarin. And in a characteristic manner of a trickster, Isola deceives all the officers into believing that he is the real commissioner. He capitalises on the erroneous impression these officers have of him and uses it to his own advantage. He cannot hide his shock of being mistaken for the PCC when he says:

How funny! How fortunate! So they think I am the Public Complaints Commissioner! And naturally they are loaded with sins and fear. Well, let them come to purge themselves. I am sure it'll be a mutually beneficial exercise. Ah, talk of walking into a gold mine! (43)

As pointed out earlier, Osofisan condemns the corruption perpetuated by religious leaders in our contemporary society, as represented by Baba Fawomi, Pastor Ifagbemi, the Price Control Officer and the Chairman himself. Baba Fawomi pretends to have expert knowledge of the Ifa divination process. He exploits the people's belief in Orunmila to extort money and other material goods from them. He offers the Councillor's sacrifice to Orunmila as the only option to prevent the PCC from detecting their criminal acts of corruption, even though he lacks an in-depth knowledge of Ifa rituals. He charges higher fees than the normal professional charges and steals household items in Pastor Ifagbemi's house. As pastor invites him to cast a spell that would prevent Solarin from discovering the issue of the church's missing funds, he dupes the pastor and says that Solarin has brought along with him terrible spirits that have to be bribed. Pastor Ifagbemi is also guilty of this corruption. He too steals church funds, shifts his guilt into an innocent person, keeps love letters of married women, and consults oracles. Though a professed Christian priest, he still identifies himself with traditional religion as exemplified in his name: Pastor Nebuchadnezzar Ifagbemi. He is a materialist, and a corrupt Christian pastor who wears charms around his waist. He bribes Oriebora by giving his daughter's hand in marriage to him so as to save him from punishment for the missing church funds.

The Price Control Officer claims a false spiritual purity and protests when Baba Fawomi sends for her to come and administer an oath. She says:

I am a staunch Christian. I belong to the ranks of the First Apostolic Movement for the Lagos Bar Beach. My Bible bought in London, was blessed ten years ago ... I pay my dues also every Sunday to the First CMS Cathedral ... If he thinks he can intimidate me ... by bringing an Ifa Priest here, he's deceiving himself I don't believe in Juju. (9)

But later in the play, she is seen in the same light as her other colleagues by seizing first-choice goods from hoarders, bribing the Ifa Priest, and bribing Isola with twenty envelopes full of money. Council Chairman is another character guilty of religious charlatanism. He claims to be a church leader, yet he consults the oracle, bribes the Ifa Priest and Oriebora, and embezzles the public funds. He is not only involved in the practice of corruption but also encourages others to do it.

In Sam Ukala's *Odour of Justice*, like Osofisan's *Who Is Afraid of Solarin?*, the Task Force that is set up to see the development of Oki land, led by Uzun and Uzi, becomes corrupt and public funds are embezzled. While the youth, led by Nwokoro, demand that the account of all levies the people have paid be rendered, especially when no developmental progress is seen, Uzun and Uzi become violent and refuse to render any account because there is no fund left to account for, since money contributed has been misappropriated. This is why Uzi retorts:

Boys of nowadays! They want to hang their hats where their hands cannot reach. What's his interest in the account? Are sucklings now to tell Oki how to spend its money? (147)

Even when Uzun tells the king that this issue could be discussed in private since they cannot render account to "riff-raff", Uzi threatens Nwokoro, saying, "I guess you do not wish to do something good with your life ..." (155). Nwokoro boldly replies:

Don't intimidate me, sir! I represent the youth of Oki. We are tired of pouring money into a few insatiable bellies. We know of some people who have been trading with Oki's money, which should be in the bank. We know of some people who have paid Oki's money into their personal accounts. We know those who claim to be carrying our money to our lawyer but end up sharing it in the bush. The leg that moves warawara is often followed by the eye that moves warawara. (155)

The king, the Elema of Oki, on discovering that the Task Force on the modernisation of Oki is guilty of corruption, dissolves it. The dissolution does not go down well with the members of the Task Force and they conspire to deal with him. Uzun tells Uzi, "He thinks he is the highest traditional ruler in the universe" and then he faces the king and addresses him: "You are drawing a battle line, Obiamaka. I hope you're armed" (157). As soon as he finishes saying this, together with Uzun, they storm out of the palace.

The above is an example of what happens in modern-day Nigeria where those in charge of developing a sector, for instance, embezzle people's money. Examples abound in

Nigeria today: corruption of public officers on Fuel Subsidy, the dwindling fame of the Nigerian Stock Market, and the revelations during the ENDSARS protests, to mention a few. These funds are stolen with impunity, with the belief that no one can question them. Uzun and Uzi steal Oki's money instead of using it for the development of roads, electricity, pipe borne water and the provision of other amenities. Elema decries the poor condition of Oki when he tells his people:

From the neglect that Oki has suffered from successive governments, it is clear to me that Oki would have to uplift itself. The road to Oki is worse than a farm path; Oki has no electricity, no potable water. Oki has nothing that makes living attractive. This is why our young men drift, in large numbers, to other towns with better living conditions. They work or trade in those places, build their mansions there while their family huts in Oki drop and crumble ... (153)

This situation in Oki is the same in contemporary Nigeria. However, instead of looking for a solution to the problem, political leaders and those in government fold their arms, even as they divert public fund to their private pockets.

It is often said in the Nigerian parlance, that "judiciary is the hope of the masses". Sam Ukala reveals the corruption that pervades the Nigerian judiciary. In the Nigerian judiciary, cases of corruption abound that one wonders what the future holds for one. There are many reports of judges taking bribe so as to twist the law and punish not the offenders, but the innocent. The offenders are then set free! In *Odour of Justice*, this issue of judges receiving bribes is exposed. Because Owodo II has joined Uzun and Uzi in their bid to punish Elema for dissolving the Task Force, they sue Elema to a court where they have bribed the judge. One of their plans is to remove Elema from the throne; hence, they secretly crown Umogwum's son, whom she gives birth to as a result of her adultery with Uzi. Uzi and Uzun show that they are power brokers in the scheme of things as Oki's affairs are concerned. Hence, they team up with Owodo II to destroy Elema. Uzun says, "Apart from the three of us here, who is Oki?" (163). Owodo II complements Uzun's statement when he says, "... we'll teach him the lesson of his life. This is just the beginning. By installing Nwandu-Okoro as the Elema of Oki, I have effectively dethroned him" (163-164). Corruption in the judiciary is revealed when Nwakego boldly says that:

What can the law do for him? Now that those infidels, who judged our first cases in his favour, have all been thrown away on transfer and our men are now the judges, we control the law. (164)

The fact that Uzun, Uzi and Owodo II have succeeded in putting their men as judges shows that the law is at their beck and call. They influence judgement and have their way. This is why Uzun says that, "The way to infinitely ride the law like an ass is to pretend to respect it. That way, others would continue to prostrate themselves before it while it tramples upon them in accordance with your dictates" (164) and Owodo II concludes that "...Now, we shall crush justice in our mighty hands" (164). Because the judges have been bribed, Elema's case in court against Owodo II that clearly should have been won by the former is won by the latter.

Elema's lawyer shows his annoyance over this development when he laments that:

The way some of these judges liquidate one's brilliant performance for a mess of porridge is, to say the least, sickening and frustrating ... I detest what some of my learned friends do: tout for bribe for the judge so their client can win a case that he should clearly lose! (180)

The issue of corruption is not peculiar to judges alone, lawyers too are involved. These are the people the above lawyer calls "learned friends". Corruption, therefore, pervades the entire nation of Nigeria. People's fundamental rights are denied of them in the court because they do not have godfathers.

## 7. Social and Marital Problems in Contemporary Nigeria

Apart from corruption, embezzlement and injustice, the problems of marital infidelity still pervades the present-day Nigeria and playwrights have continued to incorporate this into their plays. In traditional Nigeria, it is expected of a wife, for instance, to be faithful to her husband. It is a taboo for her to have a male sex friend once she is married. If she flouts this taboo of the land, there may be severe consequences. One of such is that the woman's husband may die, or any of the children may lose his/her/their lives. However, if the woman confesses, at least in some communities, or societies, a propitiatory sacrifice may be offered to appease the gods of the land. This type of sacrifice differs from one community to another.

Sam Ukala's *Odour of Justice* truly portrays this infidelity through Umogwum, Ofume's wife. Her act of infidelity is first noticed when she starts coming home late; and when she is accosted by the husband, she is always ready with excuses. Ofume charges at her when he says:

You're getting more confident in this game ... Every day, you find a new excuse for coming home well after midnight. You went to see your mother. Your brother was fighting with his wife and you went to restore peace. Your sister was ill and you went to ... I lie here and see and hear what you do outside. (127)

Umogwum dramatises or represents contemporary women who go about cheating on their husbands. Some even go extra mile bringing home other men's pregnancies, claiming their husbands are responsible. Umogwum tries to play this trick in order for her to claim a throne she does not deserve. Her action is a disgrace to herself and her modern-day women who think they are sharp but unknown to them, their husbands are aware of this practice. Her infidelity and pregnancy for another man is the cause of her husband's (Ofume's) sickness and death. Of course this is the resultant effect of these insatiable women who run after sugar daddies and politicians for money and sexual satisfaction. While discussing with Obiamaka, Ofume shows further, his regrets and he laments over his wife's infidelity. He informs Obiamaka: "I came back from Ijebu ... and noticed her

pregnancy ...” (128). He concludes that his wife is not a good wife at all. According to him,

A good wife is the pride of her husband. She is his wealth, his life. Umogwum is my shame, my penury and my death. Ozo, Nwokonbo, Imade, everyone else was bothered about my wife. Umogwun was bothered about my death. While they took me to Ijebu-Ode for treatment and looked after me there for one year, Umogwun was here seeking an heir to her throne ... (128)

As is characteristic of some unrepentant, devilish and uncaring women, even when caught, they still stand bold to defend their actions. This is why the unashamed Umogwum challenges her husband that, “How many of them know that all you have between your thighs is a cold, limp rag?” (128). She tortures Ofume further, asking him whether Ofume expects her to “stitch up” herself forever because her husband is ill! (128) and that:

How old am I, Ofume, that you should expect me to lie fallow like an abandoned farmland? My seven children have died here, before your very eyes. One by one, they died. And now you are also ... Or do you deceive yourself with the thought that you are still alive? You have no heir, Ofume, no heir to your throne. The wife of a king dreams to be the mother of a king. And I wish to realise my dream. Can you give me an Elema with the cold, limp rag between your thighs? Can you impregnate me by lying lifeless beside me night after night? Answer me! (128)

Despite the death of her children one after the other as a result of her infidelity and now the looming death of her husband, she is not ready to stop the act. It is the danger of women’s infidelity that has spurred Ukala to draw attention to this contemporary fact. The husbands’ lives are in the hands of their wives. A man blessed with a good wife will survive it.

Infidelity among women is further revealed in Osofisan’s *Women of Owu* when Iyunloye is found to have slept with married men outside her matrimonial home. When the news filters into his ears, of his wife’s adulterous act, the Maye, General Okunade, concludes that the only solution left is to kill his wife. All along, the woman has escaped into another community where she has gone to meet one of her lovers. General Okunade has tried to get her by all means, to face the music. Eventually after capturing her, he expresses his joy in the following words:

At last, the day I’ve been waiting for, dreaming about! The woman is in my hands at last, that shameful whore I called my wife! ... Who would believe it? ... But in truth, it was more because of Prince Adejumo, The dog who stole her from me. Now he is gone, felled by one of our ordinary soldiers. And it is her turn. I am going to make her suffer as much as she made me. She’ll beg, and crawl in the sand till both her knees are in tatters. And then I’ll kill her. (46)

The husband, unlike Ofume, decides to take a drastic action to reward her of her infidelity. Erelu warns him of the “power” of Iyunloye to persuade him from killing her, especially because Maye’s wife’s actions are sacrilegious since “it was my son your wife bewitched and led us to this

calamity” (47). The calamity is the invasion of Owu by the allied forces which has led to the death of many. Maye feels he can handle the matter alone when he tells Erelu that:

That’s because you don’t know how deep it is, the wound she inflicted on me. That love I had for her can never wake again, I assure you. Still, I’ll take your advice. We’ll put her in some other caravan. When we get back to Ife, she’ll pay the full price for her life of infidelity and waywardness, and serve as an example to others. (58)

Even having committed the sin of infidelity, some women responsible for their husbands’ deaths go extra miles and try foul means of ritual sacrifices, with the help of diviners, to calm the husbands’ spirit to avoid their wrath or to cover up for their atrocity so as not to be discovered as the real cause of the demise of their spouses. One of such ways of achieving this is to drop a coin on the husband’s body during burial. This example is found in *Odour of Justice*, when Umogwum goes into the room where her late husband’s body is. As soon as she enters, Ozo tells the others, “We must watch her very closely. That woman is tough like the elephant’s hide. Watch her. Make sure she doesn’t drop a coin on Ofume’s body” (145). When Okwunne asks him what that means, he quickly replies that, “If she drops a coin on him, then she’d have paid her penance” (146). Then men watch her closely more and then when she seems to be too close to the body, Nwokonbo, who cannot afford to let Umogwun achieve her aim, asks her to leave the room immediately.

As pointed out earlier, these playwrights, through their incorporation of oral traditions, have exposed the dangerous act of infidelity in women. This act, as explained above, sends either the children or the husbands to their untimely deaths. Through this exposure, the playwrights draw the men’s attention so that the awareness is there and the men should prepare and prevent any action that can lead to their wives’ infidelity. Any method or means with which to achieve this is not a problem.

Just as the problem of infidelity by women still poses a hard nut to crack to men in this modern age, there is another hurdle that confronts the men as a result of the women’s threat at the home front. This is the issue of women liberation which has been captured by scholars and critics as “feminism”. This social problem, a nut, hard as it is to crack by men, has remained a bitter pill to swallow. At the home front, women want to be seen as equal with men. To them, they can no longer open their eyes and be relegated to the background as “second-class citizens”. They now fight back, against what they regard as male oppression. The women are no longer ready to accept the complete superiority of men as tradition has placed it. Hence, they canvass equal rights and opportunities with men.

Tess Onwueme, like other female feminist writers, advocates in her plays, *Tell It to Women* and *The Missing Face* that women’s value should not be tied to traditional beliefs because they are not to be seen as an appendage to men. She portrays this through her major characters. In *The Missing Face*, for example, the playwright portrays the essence of a woman. The “Ikenga”, the Igbo ancestral symbol

of manhood and personal achievement, is given to Ida Bee, a woman, by her great grandfather. Through this, her great grandfather proves that Ida Bee is capable, important, and has equal rights with a man. The "Ikenga" given to her is a split one into two, the other part being missing and she is asked to go and look for the missing part. Of course the split Ikenga is given to her on her twenty-first birthday. In the play, Onwueme brings out the femininity in women through Ida Bee who shows that a woman should not be strictly tied to her role as a mother to care for children and as a wife to her husband. Ida Bee shows that a woman can also provide for the family and work in any organisation. This is why she tells Amaechi, that, "I'm the one who works from paycheck to paycheck in an empty job going nowhere. Nike shoes and video games; bills piling up before I even earn the money" (3-4). This statement reveals that women can occupy prominent positions where men have dominated and that their functions as wives are not limited, since they seem to be, in some cases, the breadwinners at home.

Women express their disappointment in men who fail in their responsibilities. This is seen where Ida Bee becomes disappointed in Momah who disappoints her after all the support she gives to him to finance his education. She laments that:

As the seed grew in me, MOMAH, riding on my back, graduated from college, secured the Green Card. And with that, he went out and got a car, a house. Then I became irrelevant. He no longer needed me. Nor wanted me. His intention was to blot me out of his memory (32).

Ida Bee never envisaged that Momah would definitely disappoint her. She is seen as being irrelevant, rejected and humiliated in the hands of Momah who regards her as a slave who has no future and ambition in life. With all these despicable acts by Momah towards Ida Bee, she summons courage and brushes aside all the injustice, hunger and deprivation. Onwueme portrays her as an embodiment of hope and envisage their future being transformed.

Nebe eulogises Ida Bee for her success as a woman. Onwueme, through Nebe, reflects the value of a woman and obviously makes a distinction between being a man and being a woman. She says, "What does a man know about the origin of milk? How can a man measure the value of a woman's breast? Women bear the breasts of the earth. Men must not destroy it" (37).

She reflects that women are now advanced from being mere house objects to having intellectual voice. Odozi, Momah's father, sees the women as nothing and that no matter what, man will always be above woman. Nebe quickly intervenes, saying:

Enough of that now! For years, the hearts of women have dangled in the pendulous swing of the way of men. A daughter now takes the paddle that steers the canoe to the shore. The sun died long ago when sun went to sleep! Now, time reincarnated, delivered a daughter in the twilight of hope ... The sheep which boasts of a ram as its only child is childless.

"Ram" in Nebe's statement means "son"; therefore, any

man (sheep) who boasts of a ram (son) as his only child is childless. By implication, a daughter is more important than a son. Much as Momah tries to erode women of femininity, hoping they still live in their primitive way of life, Ida Bee becomes the heroine who eventually survives all the pains, agony, humiliation, relegation and shattered dreams. Despite relegating Ida Bee to the background by Momah and calling her an outcast, Onwueme makes Momah to see the essence of a woman through Amaechi her son. Amaechi prefers the mother to the father. The conversation between father and son explains it better:

AMAECHI: Where is my mother? I cannot find my mother. What have you done with her? And tell me something quick before I have to hurt you!

MOMAH: Hurt me? Your father?

AMAECHI: You heard me. If I don't find my mother, you get hurt, JACK!

MOMAH: How can you hurt me, your father!

AMAECHI: I've got a gun

ODOZI: You would shoot your own father?

AMAECHI: He's done something terrible to my mother. I know it. She would never leave me alone. She wouldn't just take off and leave me – not like my father! (44)

This show of the essence of women in the society is further heightened in *Tell It to Women*. Through Ruth and Daisy, and the entire Idu women, we see the craze for women in their strong desire to be liberated from men. This is why Ruth tells Daisy that "marriage is an unforgivable insult to women. And I see no reason why any educated woman with her head still sitting on her shoulders should give it any thought, much less accept it" (71). Daisy reveals her annoyance at men who treat their wives as surrogate mothers. She then laments that "wives are treated as subhuman ... nothing but objects of marginality" (78). Ruth insists that "wives are nothing but some glorified slaves who need to be liberated" (78) and henceforth after their discussion, they seek various ways to be liberated from their husbands and assert their own authorities.

Daisy shows her anger when Sherifat, her mother-in-law, visits her at home. Sherifat is surprised at Daisy's demeanour when she says, "This is my son's house. I do not need any invitation to come to my own house and I will come and sit, where I like ... this is my own house" (81). Daisy's reply to her is an indication of her (Daisy) trying to show her own importance in her husband's house and so, she is not ready to receive or embrace any intruder into her matrimonial home. Daisy looks at Sherifat sternly in the face and tells her that "... people cannot just be walking into my house unannounced and expect any embrace. And I think I deserve to be informed that ..." (81).

Throughout the play, Daisy, Ruth and the other women struggle to express their significance in the scheme of things. Women then continue to prepare for the visit of Her Excellency, wife of the President who is scheduled to nail on the head, a confirmation on the need of women to fight for their positions in the society. When the day comes, all the



women gather to welcome Her Excellency who is briefly introduced by Daisy. Then Her Excellency rises to address the women:

At last, the moment has come. This is the day that the Lord has made: for women! It is our time to be heard. For years, women's voice have been oppressed and marginalized, exploited and burdened in the patriarchal hierarchy of the feudalistic hegemony. Women are taking back what belongs to them: Freedom, liberty and equality. Today we celebrate. We celebrate the liberty to excel without fear of oppression. We celebrate the right to equality. We celebrate the right to better living conditions. Today we celebrate women. It is a new beginning ... (199)

Just after her speech, all the women, in their thunderous voices, hail and applaud her and then they celebrate through drums, dance and songs.

As said earlier, the playwrights, through the adaptation of oral tradition features – song, music, dance, song, etc. – expose a nagging contemporary reality: the quest for liberty by women from men. This has virtually caused many problems at the home front. Divorces are recorded daily, wives sue their husbands to court, they even kill their husbands by stabbing them while asleep, they cut off their husbands' genitals and they no more want to play their traditional roles at home and so, the future is not known as regards the consequences of these.

Another social problem and modern phenomenon in the plays studied is the attention drawn to the gap that exists between the rich and the poor. There is always the marginalisation of the poor and the rich who continue to trample upon the rights of the poor. The playwrights whose plays are studied have revealed this negative trend in their plays. This is why Tanure Ojaide [6] says that “literature has to draw attention to the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots. Literature has become a weapon against the denial of basic human rights”.

The very opening of *The Missing Face* presents us with some images of the present-day buildings. The playwright's stage description reads, “Time present, midnight... A cast of round mud huts, crowned with conical thatch-roofs, standing defiant, confronting the face of the modern mansions ahead of them, and outside the rustic ambience of this present state (2). The above confirms the fact that the buildings are of the modern world. The mud huts contrast with “modern mansions ahead of them”. The poor people live in the mud huts while the modern mansions are inhabited by the rich. In other words, one can imagine a picture of modernism from the style of complex and modern edifices, and the local landscape of “round mud huts”. This presents a typical example of what we have in our modern society.

To drive home this point, the playwright casts some light on the image of present-day workers who are paid meagre salaries for their heavy services. Such people live from hand to mouth, or complement their lean incomes by doing odd jobs. An example of such person is Ida Bee. She reveals this when she laments that, “I'm the one who works from paycheck to paycheck in an empty job going nowhere. Nike

shoes and video games; bills piling up before I even earn the money” (3-4). This typifies the sorry state of workers who toil from dawn to dusk but at the end of the month, receive a paltry sum to be expended in payment of numerous bills. This scenario is typical of what our people (Africans) who reside in western countries suffer at the hands of the whites. This same issue of poverty and financial incompetence also manifests where Ida Bee takes a cursory look at her African brothers and sisters residing in America. She thus assesses their lives, their financial status and other accomplishments; hence, she cries out in disapproval:

All we get in Milwaukee is a bunch of fractured lives. Uncle Henry is an alcoholic. His wife and children livin' up in Kenosha with Uncle Ron, whose little Oshkosh job can hardly feed himself, let alone some extra mouths. And Uncle Charlie? Well, you know Uncle Charlie. So slick he can't keep himself out of jail... (4)

The above statement reveals that the poor Africans who travel abroad live “fractured lives”. Not only that, those who have travelled out in search of greener pastures end up in jail in the United States of America. Some are even killed unjustly. The case of George Floyd, the black American who was killed by the white supremacists is a good example. The crave for “Black Lives Matter” is now the order of the day. Uncle Charlie is one of such poor Africans who, today, still wallows in jail!

## 8. Conclusion

It is pertinent to note that some of the problems and disturbing issues addressed in the plays studied still continue to plague the Nigerian and even African society of today. The world today is so vast that the events and actions that happen daily amount to great concern. This is why creative writers, especially Nigerian playwrights, continue to present issues prevailing in their societies in their plays. This shows that the playwrights are very much at alert with their social realities. They discuss these socio-political and cultural issues for positive change. As said earlier, though the plays used for this study are set in a highly traditional folkloric milieu, the authors have fused into them, the oral literary tradition to project contemporary realities.

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