

## OIL POLITICS IN POST -COLONIAL AFRICA:A REFELCTION OF ECO-FEMINIMS AND PROTEST IN TESS ONWUEME'S PLAY ,WHAT MAMA SAID

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the element of 'Eco-feminism' that is reflected in the play, 'What Mama Said' by Tess Onwueme' an Igbo, Nigerian writer in the Post-colonial Africa. The female characters in this play are the victim of disenfranchisement by tyrannical culture practice and tradition, class gender, over and above **post-colonial national** and **International Oil Politics**. The foreign International Oil companies are exploiting the natural resources in Africa for monetary gain and in this process polluting the mother nature. The educated Igbo woman wants to claim her power over her land and ban this foreign interferences. However the corrupt political leader pay no attention to their demand. Ultimately, in this play starts the frenzied fight against corrupt institutes for political gain and thereby **women empowerment**. The main aim behind their struggle is to gain power and contribute back to **Nation building**, which had been denied to them by faulty and corrupt system. The researcher in this paper concentrates on important, explorative socio-political incidences depicted in the play and thereby analyses the rationality behind the collective fight of women in general and leading female protagonist in particular, viz: Omi, Imo, and Hadeja, Oshimi and Cross River. The paper concludes that the united sisterhood is the final solution to the Nigerian educated women who, along with her rural counterparts need to zero in on agenda that will lead to political gain, economic independence and thereby social progress of women in the society.

**Key words:** Ecofeminism, Igbo, Post-colonial Africa, International Oil Politics, Women Empowerment, Nation building.

Introduction: Africa which was once a colony of the white master was victim of Colonialism. Colonialism is a systematic planned political and cultural project of total control over the colonized. According to Ngugi WA Thiong'o, "the real aim of colonialism was to control people's product or the language of real life that is social wealth." A philosophical analysis of the colonized is Ngugi's focus in his *Decolonizing the Mind*, in which he postulates the fundamentals of mental liberation as a prerequisite for and prelude to physical, economic and socio political liberation. (1-2) by implication, this process of mental liberation is bound to influence contemporary African literary writers and scholars and decolonize their minds so that they may address issues salient to the people. (Chinweizu, Jamie and Madubuike 242). However one of the salient race in Post-Colonial Africa is the voice of African woman for their struggle for survival with dignity. Historically, the domineering party reacts to any form of resistance from the less powerful party by exerting pressures to coerce it into quiescence and submission. Such pressure manifests itself as deprivation, racism, segregation, and discrimination. These imply principles of exclusivity and separatism which are applied not necessarily by a majority group on a minority group but more effectively by a more powerful group on a less powerful, perhaps disintegrated group. In the African situation, coercion has been prominent within the contexts of colouration, neo-colonization as well as apartheid, and accordingly, each of these has

generated different modes of resistance by the people in pursuit of recognition and survival. It also set in motion a process of resistant reactions from the people in search of the survival as free and independent. In recent decades, many people active in the environmentalist and feminist movements have joined forces in support of what they see as a common cause. This movement is known as ecological feminism, or ecofeminism, to use the term of Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. The Eco feminists feel that men dominate women and humans dominate nature. Naturally, then, women and the environmentalists should be united in their struggle. Basically ecofeminism is a philosophy as well movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of the natural environment. Rosemary Radford Ruether in her work *New Woman New Earth* (1975) mentioned: women must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movements to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this society.(123) Ecofeminism argues that there is a connection between women and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal society. Such type of connection this also comes from the positive identification of women with nature. Vandana Shiva claims that women have

a special connection to the environment through their daily interactions with it that has been ignored. He States :Women in subsistence economies, producing and reproducing wealth in partnership with nature, have been experts in their own right of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes. But these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs are not recognised by the Capitalists reductionist paradigm, because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth.(39)Osonye Tess Onwueme is a political dramatist. Osonyc Tess Onwueme belongs to 'Igbo' community in Africa, which is mostly found in profitable Delta region of Nigeria. As a result, the writer in her plays depicts the adverse effect of colonization on the ideas and customs of Igbo community in post-colonial period, due to oil politics and civil war. Her plays, strictly, reflect critical perspective of Nigerian women on corrupt socio-political system in Nigeria, a theme which was never tried in the history of African drama before by women. Osonyc Tess Onwueme explains in "An Interview with Playwright" : from the processes of colonization and colonialism and neo-colonialism, a lot of rural values through which women were empowered traditionally have been eroded. And I'm interested in investigating those traditional construct and norms through which women were empowered (38). Her women characters stand for 'New African Women' who are socio-politically conscious of their rights and rebel powerfully to fight injustice. Professor Daniella Gioseffi once stated about Dr. Osonye Tess Onwueme's plays: The protagonist of Dr. Osonye Tess Onwueme plays tends to be women who revolt against their misuse by an out-dated and inhuman system..... Her dramas speak to us of basic human signs of nationality, age, sex or race.(i) It is significant that many events and trends in contemporary African society obviously attempt to colonize the people. Colonization here is perceived in the broadest terms of suppression, marginalization, subjugation, deprivation and total control. These conditions manifest themselves in the insensitive of political and traditional leaders, resulting in widespread and intense impoverishment of the people, unemployment, injustice and corruption. This is exactly reflected in her plays-What Mama Said, revealing the direction and parameters of sustained survival in an environment that is determined to squeeze the life-blood from the people's humanity Her play - 'What Mama Said' (2003), she illuminates the effect of national and global oil politics on the lives of impoverished rural Nigeria. In 2000, she received a Ford Foundation research grant for her project "Who

Can Silence the Drums? Delta Women Speak!" The project examines the lives of rural women of the oil-producing regions of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. Her play What Mama Said is a product of that project. In this play Onwueme returns to a perennial theme, the disempowerment of rural women, those "who have the power to make and unmake the land". As an advocate for women, particularly Nigeria's rural women. Onwueme allows women to take centre stage in this play... In an attempt to give women voice and to imbue their lives with meaning, Onwueme creates combatant female characters who confront those structures that seek to subordinate them. In the plays What Mama Said, there are female characters like Omi, Imo, and Hadeja, her young female protagonists, galvanize their mothers under a battle cry of land reclamation. "Our land! We must-must take back what is ours! Resource Control," the women scream, insisting on their ownership of the land and the nation, asserting "We have no leaders!"In the work, 'Gender Issues in Nigeria: A feminist Perceptive' (1996)T.Akachi Ezeigbo observes: The misfortune of the modern Nigerian, African woman is that she neither enjoys political power nor economic power. Her tragedy is that she has virtually lost out on all counts and [she] finds herself even more marginalized and devalued than her traditional foremothers.(Xvii). The collective fight by African women becomes symbol of 'Women Power'. These women, by demanding control of land, assure ultimately economic empowerment. In What Mama Said, the women do not have representatives who could speak for them. Like their foremothers, who protested against the/British colonial administration's taxation during the "Aba women war"(1928-30).The women in Onwueme's play rise in mass protest against the combination of oppressive forces: multinational oil companies with neo-imperial intentions and corrupt local/national leaders who have abdicated their responsibility . In addition her plays invoke number of women's rebellions of 1980s against multinational oil corporations, which have polluted farmland and alienated women, who are the primary cultivator of their farmland. For instance in 1984 and 1986, women rose in Ogharefe and Ughelli (fornrer Bendel, now Delta State) respectively, in protest against what they saw as the exploitative presence or foreign oil corporations, which not only had alienated them from their lands but also had not, compensated them adequately. In fact, the Ughelli LGA women's revolt is as a localized protest against the taxation owned but gradually transformed into a mass against the pollution, the lack of compensation for lost lands, and unequal distribution of oil wealth. In the 1990s, Ogoni\_women mobilized and rebelled against the presence of multinational oil corporations on their

land. These are the issues against which Onwueme's women protest. In the opening scene of (*Movement Nine* ;) Oshimi and Cross River, two major rivers of Nigeria, now personified as leading female figures, cry out against the death of the land and call other women to action. Calling the mothers and daughters of the land, Oshimi informs them of a threat to their land, their soul, stating, "Something . . . something strange, smelly, and strong is sapping our land." Her

*Cross River: Your fathers and brothers?*

*Chorus: Lost, branded, or wounded!*

*Cross River: Your mothers and sisters?*

*Chorus (Inflamed): Defied, maimed, or murdered!*

*Cross River: Your pride and dignity?*

*Chorus: Cut down!*

*Cross River: And if they take all away, and what is left?*

*Chorus: Nothing! Nothing!(WMS 156)*

While these questions and their responses delineate the women's personal experiences, the effect is a collective awakening to their shared reality, which helps to galvanize them into an oppositional body. Again, Cross River declares, "Ever since they discovered oil in our land, they drill, dry, and fry us with the fishes and farmlands all cooking in oil." Then, she asks, "Do you smell the fishes roasting in their hot oil poured over the rivers?" to which the chorus of women responds, "Yes! They've refined our oil into a curse!" Punning on the word "refine," the women signal the transformation of oil, perceived initially as a gift, an economic "blessing," into a potential source of their demise. The significance of the pun is also not lost on Cross River, who, appropriating their symbolism, asks, "Where? Where else in the world does oil cease to anoint?" "Here! Here! Here!" the women scream. Again, Cross River prompts them, providing another catalogue of losses: "Plants, animals, children, men, and women cooking in their oil. Oil sapped from the very soul of our sagging land. Ah! People of Suffer land! Do you see yourselves drowning?" "Yes!" the women shout. At the end, whipped into a fury, the women rise to action, shouting, "No more waiting!" and as the stage direction indicates, "in this fury, the mob rises, facing the direction of the GRA/Oil Club." Onwueme is quite aware of the powerful political messages of the play *What Mama Said* It draws attention to the national and international silences over the impoverishment of Nigerians, especially those from the oil-producing areas of the country. The play also draws attention to the loss of rich farmlands to large oil multinational corporations and the complicity of Nigerian local and national governments in the perpetration of environmental violence against Nigerians, especially in the Niger Delta. It is for articulating such opposition that writer-activist Ken Saro-Wiwa lost his life. On November 10, 1995, he was executed by the Nigerian military government,

sister. Cross River, adds, "People of Suffer land! Our land bleeds! The land weeps! Tell me, who among you here, no matter how young, no matter how old, has not lost our blood?" In a call-and-response sequence led by Cross River's urging questions, the chorus of women, now frenzied by their anguish and loss, chant the many atrocities they and their families have experienced:

despite international protests, for his opposition to the illegal appropriation and environmental destruction of Ogoni farm lands by multinational oil corporations, the lack of compensation to the Ogoni and the murder of ogoni people .He had founded the 'Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People' (MOSOP) as a means of organizing his people to fight against environmental destruction and to demand their rights by drawing local and international attention to their subordination by multinational oil corporations in collusion with the Nigerian government. As **Rob Nixon** points out in "Environmental Justice and Micro minority Rights," By the time Saro-Wiwa was executed, the Nigerian military and Mobile Police Force had killed 2,000 Ogoni through direct murder and the burning of villages. Ogoni air had been fouled by the flaring of natural gas; Ogoni croplands scarred by oil spills; Ogoni drinking and fishing waters poisoned. Although Shell was driven out of Ogo-niland in 1993, it simply moved on to the other parts of Nigeria's once lush delta, now a delta of death.(III) Clearly, these are the problems that Onwueme's women confront and march against in the play But environmental injustice is not their only concern they also rage against the poor economy, the absence of jobs for the youth, and in general the greed and unaccountability of their leader. "We reject all leaders off falsehood. We reject leaders who take and take and never give anything good in return! Away! Away with their lies!" they scream. Had this play been written during the military dictatorship that executed Saro Wiwa, Onwueme would have been described as unpatriotic and possibly charged with treason. She would also have been persecuted or faced a similar fate as Saro-Wiwa, imprisonment, or exile, linking her with a number of African writers, including Dennis Brutus, Jack Mapanje, Nawal el Saadawi, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, to mention only a few.Only international attention to

their cause will give Onwueme's women solace. Led by the youth, they assert their agency by abducting representatives of the international oil corporations, the local leaders, and several national political figures. In the mock court scene of the epilogue, convened to try the women and youth, it is ironically the leaders who are on trial—hence the title "A Nation in Custody." In collapsing the identities of several figures—the Supreme Court is now led by depressive characters such as Oceana, the foreign oil representative, and Pipeline, the corrupt chief—Onwueme succeeds in signalling a continuity in the hierarchies and relations of power. Those who have controlled the resources continue to cling to and desire to exert power over the women and youth, whom they have disempowered. The public, however, outraged by the women's detention, demands their freedom. In the trial scene, it becomes clear that the nation and its leadership rather than the women and youth are on trial, Hadeja (one of the young girls), now as Defences attorney for the accused women, draws attention to the women's victimization by cataloging the wrongs they have suffered when she says: "For nearly half a century, Your Honor, the living mothers, sons, and daughters of the land have been trampled. Oppressed. Exploited. And dehumanized. . . . Since the Sweet Crude was discovered in their land, each one of them has had their own personal tragic experiences. They've been without jobs, farming and fishing resources . . . painful, hard experiences that progressively changed their lives for the worse."(WMS,186) In presenting their stories of tragedy, alienation, and dehumanization before a world court, Hadeja helps them to claim their humanity and voices, which are slowly being muted. "I cannot speak for them!" Hadeja announces to the court. "Let them speak," she adds. Calling the women, she urges them: "Now it's time! Your time. Speak for yourselves! Speak." Like Brecht's Saint Joan of the Stockyards, these young women — Hadeja, Imo, and Omi — pick up the mantle of leadership to lead the charge against new forces of oppression. They are the catalyst for their mothers' rebellion, for in the opening scene of the play, a young woman asks, "Don't you think it's time? Time to take our case to the people ... In short, the world?"(189) "Land is life," Pipeline ironically tells us early in the play. Generations of Africans have died in their struggles against the loss of their indigenous lands. The landscapes of African national and continental histories "from Cape Town to Cairo" are littered with the bodies of Africans lost in the struggles to preserve African lands. A people or nation

without its lands is no nation. Hence, national liberation struggles as well as several post-independent civil wars have been waged over land issues. Ironically, it is the land that suffers. For Nigerians Biafra, and the civil war are painful reminders of the struggle over the control of the land and resources. Still more than thirty years after Biafra, these issues continue to dominate national discussions, women's protests in Onwueme's play underscores the need for a national discussion of abuse of power by the leadership and Representatives as well as the marginalized or eliding particular group. Saro Viwa and his MOSOPs reminded us, as do Onwueme's women, of this need to struggle against annihilation by neo-imperial forces. Although women are at the centre of this play, Onwueme carefully avoids a vilification of men. In fact, the women work with the youth whose leadership is composed of young men and young women. Women, however, are the dominant figures. One can attribute their dominance to a number of factors. The protest begins at the market square, and because women generally control the market, it is not surprising that the protest's leadership is in the hands of women. In addition, they are marginalized and victimized in multiple ways, by patriarchal structures (Pipeline, Imo's uncle, gives her to a white man in exchange for oil "Deals") and by the failing economy, which affects their market economy. At the beginning of the play and in the beginning of "Movement Four," Hawker/Hadeja is seen desperately trying to sell her fruit without success. Most men, especially in these oil-producing regions, have gone to work in the refineries, leaving the women and children behind. As a dramatist who is also interested in interpreting and promoting African cultural practices, Onwueme infuses her plays with African—more specifically, Nigerian-cultural practices. Dance and songs are integral features of this play, eliciting comparisons with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's / Will Marry When I Want. **Conclusion:** Clearly, Onwueme has established herself as one of Nigeria's, if not Africa's, most prolific and engaged playwrights. As an advocate for women, children, and the masses, whom she says have been muted by traditional, national, and transnational's politics and relations, In this play, the focus is the women's presentation of their stories, and, as Imo says, all the women want is to "live with dignity," to tell their own stories. The paper concludes that the united sisterhood is the final solution available to the Nigerian educated women who, along with her rural counterparts need to zero in on agenda that will lead to political gain, economic independence and thereby social progress of women in the society

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