

## GENDER AND IDENTITY IN TESS ONWUEME'S DRAMA, *THE BROKEN CALABASH*

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**Abstract :** Africa has rich culture of tribalism and in fact the customs , traditions etc .(of these tribes)are important mean to rectify their identities .The main role of age old customs and tradition is to enrich the lives of mankind .However, what if one of the customs of Igbo tribe , in a patriarchal social set up , ironically , is considered to be destroying the dignity of women and it is very important to know, where does African Igbo woman posit herself in such situation ??? Tess Onwueme's , female protagonist ,Ona, an educated teenager girl belonging to Igbo tribe, in *The Broken Calabash*,challenges the *Idegebe* custom which ,as per her perception ,encourages prostitution . She further ,even gets even with her father who pushes her into this custom . However , at the end , the feminist strike in Ona makes her have her revenge in a different way : Ona accuses her father Courtuma of incest !! The researcher intends to study the character sketch of Ona who fights vehemently against exploitative tradition . The researcher , concludes that the traditions and customs which fail to stand the test of time will have no takers in the modern time, especially among the young generations .To create a the melting point between the old traditions and the young generation , rationality is the main criteria considered to be valid .

**Key words:** Gender and Identity Kinship, *Idegebe* , *Igbo* , Patriarchy ,Tradition, self-assertion

**Introduction:** Tess Onwueme belongs to Igbo community in Nigeria and she is one of the leading Nigerian female dramatists who writes women centric plays . Eugene B Redmond calls her 'an African – Nigerian –Igbo – woman – feminist – artist '(Onwueme 16). Her plays ,strictly, reflect critical perspective of post colonial Nigerian women on corrupt socio-political system. Tess Onwueme's drama book, '*Three plays*' (1993) to which Eugene B.Redmond calls 'she – King Trilogy'(Onwueme 15) is compilation of her three dramas: *The Broken Calabash Broken Calabash*, *Parable for a Season* and *The Reign Of Wazobia*, respectively . *The Broken Calabash* deals with the theme of African women's subjugation in the name of outdated tradition whereas the play ,*The Reign of Wazobia* deals with Anioma Kingdom's feminist sovereign Wazobia and her army of female bodies who fight for the socio-political empowerment of women ;thereby justifying the need of united sisterhood.In all these three dramas, the dramatist deliberately portrays her women characters as socio- politically conscious figures. In the play , *The Broken Calabash* Ona, fights against ***Idegebe* tradition** . Dramatist Tess Onwueme claims to perceive theatre as a group medium for dialogue in the society as she is influenced by the Bertolt Brecht theatre ideology " where the people are challenged to look critically at their situation and compelled to want to change it

."(Uko 43) . In an interview , Tess Onwueme states : 'We live in a society where women have it hard. Their lives are manipulated by others"( Uko 271) Daniella Giseffi , comments in the introduction to the *Three Plays* , about the universal appeal of Tess Onwueme's plays :

'Her drama are very much universal plays an international; audience as they speak to us of basic human rights , regardless of national age , sex or race (Onwueme10)

Onwueme further explains(1993) that the play *The Broken Calabash* constitutes an intellectual revolt against the decadent traditional values of the caste system and further shows the tragic consequences of denying any human being , female or male , the right to an individual life or self-fulfilment (9)

In this paper the researcher proposes to have critical overview of the dramatist's treatment of the question of the African Igbo woman's position and identity in a society which deprives her of socio-political rights .The paper analyses prominent female characters Ona in the play *The Broken Calabash*..Although the discussion treats the topics separately , in the dramas , they are integrated as a part of the organic whole.

**IDENTITY :** *The Broken Calabash* presents the woman in the post colonial Nigeria , trapped in old and new tradition .She is trapped in the patriarchal and the colonial past . The drama captures the

position of African women as complicated by forcefully labelled traditions. Iniobong I Uko(2004) mentions Ezeigbo's observation on Gender roles of African women :

the misfortune of the modern Nigerian , African women is that that she neither enjoys political power no economic power .Her tragedy is that she has virtually lost out all counts and [she] finds herself more marginalized and devalued than her traditional mother (xvi)

In the drama, *The Broken Calabash* , the female protagonist Ona, rebels against her father , once she is convinced that her own father causing her lot of miseries Ona is is fade up of dictatorial attitude of her father, Courtuma who constantly restricts her movements . Courtuma crosses Ona's opinions dislikes her friends and over and above insults religious beliefs In fact she confesses to her best friend Ugo that she finds her father's love consuming which in returns makes her feel miserable , when she wishes : "I wish I had a choice when I was coming" (TBC 27-28).She further wishes to break down from father's clutches to regain her won identity when she questions , "... must my life revolves around him so. so circumscribed by him? Must I never live my life independent of him ?..."(TBC 39)

**TRADITION** :In the drama, tradition plays vital role as a biggest blow to ona's free will . The Identity of African Igbo women can be viewed against the backdrop of the importance of traditions n their society. Iniobong I. Uko mentions (2004)the importance of traditions in of African culture and its association with the gender .

Tradition is in active relationships with certain trends in the society, resulting in a process of symbiotic influencing between them. These trends include religion, speech patterns, gender roles and relations as well as socio-economic and political realities. By implication, tradition on the one hand determines the nature and process of operation of these trends in the society, and on the other, contemporary society activates the. trends to call to question their subjectivity to tradition. ...People's resistance, opposition to, and rejection of certain values of tradition arise from their deske for the static nature of tradition to succumb to modification or change to cohere with the progressive and dynamic human nature ( 52)

There are many incidences where Ona could be seen smothered by her father's expectation to follow

traditional norms .For instance Courtuma and Olianku , both have converted themselves into Christianity long ago , however , they both fear the influence of Christianity might turn their young daughter into emotionally independent girl who will never obey the age old traditions in Igbo community, as Courtuma, shares his doubt with his wife :

"We must be cautious .Life is no longer as simple as that . Times are changing and we must not pretends as if harmattan wind cannot change char out skin , too. Ona has acquired Whitman's knowledge and wisdom which is good for us in many respect . But at the same time our customs are too trenced , too old to bend or to be married to the new ways .What we achieve by sending Ona to school at all is to make up in terms our lack of numbers . That we may not die wanting and longing to enter a car owned by other people's children, who knows and who can tap the tree of the white man's wealth ."( TBC 34)

Further Courtuma, restricts Ona's visits to the Church , claiming ther is no need of no 'white man's communion' to his any family members and declares : 'white man's confession and ( catechism ) confirmation business is irrelevant activity and an attempt to catch people in a 'vicious circle'(TBC 41) . For embracing white master's religion is necessity for Courtuma's family , but deep down both husband wife have e faith in indigenious culture an tradition. . On fails to understand this point .The Christina influence among the Igbos, is the result of colonialism As Toyin Falola brings(2001) light upon this issue

Christianity has bought many aspects of Western culture and ideas about society of Nigeria .Converts are expected to abandoned indigenious religions and various aspects of their culture...total conversion of Nigerians to Christianity which means indigenious religion should be used as a point of reference in any way ...While many Nigerian converts do not entirely reject their indigenious culture, they are shaped by the worldwide view put forward by Christianity , affecting the way they look at themselves , their community and outsiders (46)

The clashes between old and new generation becomes obvious when Ona's modern approach to life starts disturbing Courtuma. In one incidence Courtuma disapproves his daughters, westernised 'wave" like hairstyle ,copied from *Vogue* fashion magazine. He criticise that her hair looks as if "á rat

fallen into oil' (TBC 37) and further he insists that she should appreciate the , "beauty of plaited hair" (TBC 38) In another incidence ,Courtuma hurts Ona, by comparing her best friend Ugo's 's dressing style to that of a prostitute's and demands that in future she should not visit his home ,provocatively dressed .Further Ona is seen to be visibly embarrassed whenever her father expresses his love for daughter with physical contact or verbally. Courtuma's love for Ona is deeply suggestive of eroticism and this is symptomatic of the danger of incest . Courtuma tells Ona :

You cant fathom the extent of my love for you , my own Jewel .My eye , my mouth .Don't you know you mean more than a daughter to me ?... my little salt that gives taste to the soup .My little dry meat that fills the mouth .My speck of jewel that out shines strings and strings of metals others use as ornaments .My diamonds I, who am your father and will always be father of your children generation after generation, even from my grave!!!You are my saviour , my confronter (TBC 38 -39)

In one more incidence, Courtuma keeps a watch on Ona and Diaku when he visits her house . Courtuma makes it sure that Diaku and Ona maintains distance while chatting and he keeps on making sarcastic comment on Diaku . Courtuma , when witnesses Ona kissing Diaku, his overreaction , surprises Ona as he shouts at her :'Ona! Ona! Ona! ...Why must you lick another mans spittle like the white man?..Isent you to school not to contact the white man's disease but to learn his grace..' (TBC 45) Courtuma is aware Diaku and Ona both are in love and wish to marry each other . However , Courtuma, turns down Diaku's proposal and this is exactly hurts Ona a lot . Courtuma, flatly refuses to give his daughter, Ona's hand in marriage to Diaku ,because she is an an *Idegebe* . He insults the opposite party by breaking the calabash which is often offered in ,Igbo community to opposite party during marriage talks

**.IDEGEBE** : Ona is a an *Idgebe*. and as per this tradition ,a girl as only child must either be kept at home as *Idegebe* to bear children for her father or marry a wife to propagate Courtuma, and Oliaku want their only daughter Ona to marry another daughter to continue the *Idgebe*tradition . Ona ,being their only child ,she needs to follow the custom of *Idegebe* to keep the family tree (parent tree) alive..Ona has a choice: A choice to bear children for

her father alone or marry a wife who can help bear children to multiply the stock. She can neither marry nor bear children for any other man. Osony Tess Onwueme comments that this *Idgebe* tradition : this (*Idegebe* ) status makes enormous demands on the daughter because she is expected to perform several male roles in the family and the whole society also recognizes her dual identity (Uko 257) Victor Uchnedu informs(1979) about the importance of the *Idegebe* tradition or woman marriage in the Igbo community :

'Woman marriage' is a recognised Igbo institution by which women can validates status in the society .Under this system , women 'marry' In their own right by paying the bride wealth and have right to dispose of their rights in their brides. Some woman allow their husbands to exercise their rights and they accept their bride as a co - wife. If such female husbands have no children , their wives share the same hut with them and their children are adopted by female husband. Generally female husbands found independent compound and then let their brides choose *Iko* ( lovers ) who are accepted to them to beget children by their 'wives'.Although there is high correlation between economic power and female husbands , other categories of women who play their roles include barren women , those who have lost all their children by death , and those who have only female children . There is no doubt that the institute of "woman marriage" 'benefits capable women by neutralizing the harsh effects of the Igbo Igbo inheritance from their deceased husbands and exclude most women from inheriting from their lineages(50)

**SELF ASSERTION** : Ona denounces the *Idegebe* tradition because as per her opinion , first, it encourages prostitution and secondly she claims a tradition which doesn't stands the test of time needs to be discarded by society She claims this *Idegebe* custom encourages prostitution and if the homestead is too shaky then need not to be nurtured . She questions the credibility of the society that sanction such arrangement. She claims it is high time such exploitative customs needs to be stopped in the modern time :

"Let the wind blow let the shaky homestead be blown anything that can not stand the force of change must be uprooted or be blown into oblivion by the storm heralding the new reason. !(TBC56)

**PATRARCHY** : Patriarchy is a social system in which males hold primary power, predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property; in the domain of the family, fathers or father-figures hold authority over women and children

Mqlara Ogundipe –Leslie(1993) in discusses Fifth mountain on her back is ‘man ‘ with his centuries old patriarchal society and urge women to fight against it

..male domination is advantageous to him ( man ) ... Thus it is up to women to combat their social disabilities ; to fight for their own fundamental and democratic rights ...The liberation of women in society is not simply about sexual freedom as most men tend to think and fear , but about the larger problem of the redistribution of privileges , power and property between the rich and poor , encompassing the smaller problem of the redistribution of power , property and privilege between men and women( 36)

**KINSHIP** : Toyin Falola explains the importance of kinship : “...Emphasis is on descent or ancestry , a family tree shos how present generation is connected to previous one ,back to the founder of the lineage.( *Culture and Customs of Nigeria* 118) Alexander Kure mentions the tradition of the importance of kinship in Nigerian society since pre – colonial time :

Pre – colonial Nigerian societies were structured around the centrality of kinship as the determinant of the productive and reproductive role of the individual in society .Childbearing was considered central to the worth of woman ...children were regarded as economic assets Aa s a general rule , the more children an individual had , the more power he / she had in their respective societies .With the introduction of colonialism , most elements of the kinship support system disappeared or were considered outdated( in Faloa ,,Soremekun : 31 )

Courtuma , tries to convince Ona that The *Idegbe* system is ideal for his family to continue his name with poor blood and it is socially sanctioned prostitution that helps him to save the root of his family . .Courtuma see nothing wrong with the system and he defends it :

‘your children or your wife must answer your father’s name .If you kept at home , any man coming to you know so already and can never claim paternity of those children...within the system , it will be my blood .Are you not my daughter? And does my blood

not flow in you? Likewise , any child you bear for me has already been branded and infuses with my blood .The homestead ...Ona .The root ...Ona’(56-57)

.Ona disagrees with him and claims this *Idegbe* custom encourages prostitution and if the homestead is too shaky then need not to be nurtured . She questions the credibility of the society that sanction such arrangement. She claims it is hight time such exploitative customs needs to be stopped in the modern time

Then the system indirectly encourages prostitution ...So the other is prostitution simply because society does not can sanction it and even though it is the same process is involved?... All must come down !If the homestead is too shaky , it must come down with the storm .If the tree’s root is not firm , let it show its face to the sky ‘(57)

Courtuma, makes it clear to Ona, that even through the *Idegbe* system she cant let Diaku father her children because he belongs to the family of Osu (lower caste ,as per the tribe hierarchies) which is a completely different family than hers and there is fear of pure blood getting polluted .Victor Uchendu in his book quote(1979)Leith –Ross that ‘the Osu are hated and feared , treated as if mean and discussed with the tone of horror and contempt’ ‘(89) When Courtuma, considers Diaku’s blood as impure blood because of his lower social status, Ona, explains her father that that if she is kept at home to bear children for her father or marry a wife either way, the blood is going to be polluted. Further , she also adds that that if they had a son , who enters an exogamous marriage , even that way , “ the blood will even be less pure”(TBC 56) Ona turns revengeful ,for pushing her into outdated tradition The tragedy with African girl are , in any given social set up , they are not allowed to think independently as Osony Tess Onwueme(1993) mentions Gay Wilentz observation :

[A]though the women are in charge of education and initiation of young girls into adulthood , they are not free ...A upholders of traditions , they are compelled to act ‘in line with past practice ‘( Abraham 4 ) whether they agree with custom or not .In a a dual sex role culture , this aspect of women’s responsibility in one which demands great respect fromn the society ..(10) (as quoted in Umeth 310 )

.Ona completely breaks down when her lover Diaku ties knot with to the Ugo, her best friend . Ona is

convinced that her father has caused all the miseries in her life. She implicates Courtuma, holding him responsible for her pregnancy. Shocked, Courtuma begs for mercy, but ultimately, he is being expelled from the community. Ona's act to implicate her father is, her another way of rebelling against the patriarchal Igbo society. Thus, Osonye Tess Onwume's heroine, dares to go beyond all means, in order to teach lessons to the exploitative agency. That is her way of getting control of her life. Being an Igbo woman with the fighting spirit, Ona dares to teach lesson to her father who is responsible for her miseries. Ona's fight can be justified with .Considering the lack of support system in their immediate environment, the women need to make efforts at individual level and find the solution. In the wake of globalization, among African societies, so called custom/ traditional policing is not always healthy way to attract and encourage young generation to follow age old traditions.

**Conclusion :** Tess Onwume's heroine Ona, is not apologetic about her methods to finding solution to her problems. Nevertheless, it suggests that the educated African women can not have freedom of will, unless the African society is mature enough to give them liberty. In the modern times, the society needs to let woman use her discretion. Traditions that doesn't stand the test of times, need to be discarded completely if the situation demands. This is high time that, in the wake of globalization African society needs to find the golden mean in order to find old as well young generation on the same page, when it comes to celebrating their own traditions and customs. However when exploitative agencies are masked in the name of traditions, the women need to fight back for their survival and self respect. African society needs to find a golden mean where both old and new generation both can be on the same page.

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