

The Quest for Female Political Leadership in Nigeria: Irene Salami-Agunloye's Vision in *More Than Dancing*

Augustine Obiajulu Eziechine, (PhD)

Department of Languages, University of Delta, Agbor, Nigeria

Queen Esene, (PhD)

Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ijellr.13/vol12n319>

Published June 10, 2024

Citation: Eziechine A.O. and Esene Q. (2024) The Quest for Female Political Leadership in Nigeria: Irene Salami-Agunloye's Vision in *More Than Dancing*, *International Journal of English Language and Linguistics Research*, Vol.12, No 3, pp.1-9

ABSTRACT: *Nigerian women writers are becoming more and more deeply committed to the mistreatment of women in their country. The writers, particularly the female playwrights, use their creations to confront the problem of Nigerian women's political alienation. Their writings shed light on a number of sociopolitical concerns intended to elevate democratic principles and sound administration in Nigeria. However, this paper takes a critical excursion into Irene Salami-Agunloye's *More Than Dancing* to establish the possibility of using drama as a means of projecting the quest for female political leadership in Nigeria. The study uses content analysis of the text to extract key issues captured by the playwright and discusses these issues in relation to female political participation and leadership in Nigeria. The study analyzes the text's substance to identify the playwright's main points and then analyzes them in light of Nigerian women's participation in and leadership in politics. The results show that a number of variables, including the party system's structure, ingrained cultural views, socioeconomic conditions, political godfatherism, thuggery, and gansterism, are working against women's attempts to unseat their male counterparts in Nigerian politics. The article concludes that Salami-Agunloye's play finally brings her vision of a female president in Nigeria to reality, notwithstanding her criticism of the practice of barring women from assuming positions of authority. Salami-Agunloye seems to be implying, then, that the feminist goal of having a female president of Nigeria is achievable.*

KEYWORDS: female writers, good governance, women, playwrights, political leadership

INTRODUCTION

The majority of Nigerian female dramatists' works are filled with topics about women and their struggle for political space in the country's political system. Several female playwrights, like Irene

Isoken Salami-Agunloye, Tess Onwueme, Stella Oyedepo, and Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh, feel that women in Nigeria are not allowed to occupy and manage important political and leadership roles. These playwrights project their visions of democracy by using their plays to expose the entire spectrum of socio-political challenges in Nigeria. However, the play *More Than Dancing*, by Irene Isoken Salami-Agunloye is the primary subject of this essay. Salami-Agunloye utilizes her drama to demonstrate that women in Nigeria might hold political leadership positions. The dramatist expresses her displeasure with the illegal discrimination and gender-based exclusion of women from leadership positions . She contends that women from Nigeria have achieved success in a variety of endeavors that were once the sole domain of men (Lar, 2022, p. 55). Salami-Agunloye thinks Nigerian women have come of age and are now capable of playing greater roles than just dancing at political events. Therefore, in *More Than Dancing*, the dramatist aims to increase women's awareness of the importance of participating actively in Nigerian politics.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In Salami-Agunloye's *More Than Dancing*, women's aspirations for political leadership are realized, although in Nigeria, this achievement has not yet occurred. This is due to a number of variables that work against women's attempts to unseat men in positions of political authority. The structure of the party system, ingrained cultural values, socio-economic variables, political godfatherism, thuggery, and gangsterism are a few of the contributing factors. The aforementioned viewpoint is supported by Arowolo and Folorunso (2010, P. 583), who identify a number of obstacles that prevent women from actively participating in Nigerian politics, including intimidation, violence, and expensive election costs.

Factors Militating Against Women's Struggle for Political Power

The Nature of Party system

In Nigeria, political parties are typically controlled by men, depriving their female counterparts of equal opportunities. With the exception of the women's leader, all executive posts within the parties are exclusively held by men. As the only office exclusively preserved for women, Madam Bisi holds this role in *More than Dancing*. Put in another way, aside from leadership roles, women do not deserve any other executive positions. Clearly, such a behavior is anti-democratic. Political choices are typically made in favor of the men when the majority of a party's executive members are men (Chidinma 2023, P. 22). Obviously, a rat cannot prevail in a courtroom with a cat serving as the chief judge. Stated differently, women would find it exceedingly challenging to win elected office in a place where men serve as the political game's referees. In her book *More Than Dancing*, Madam Bisi articulates this fear when she says, "the possibilities of women being elected are limited when men are at the helm of affairs in political parties" (P. 4). Furthermore, the society believes that politics is for men who have the heart to tread on dangerous political terrains. Women are seen as weak vessels and as such should be excluded from political practices. This is why Sani,

a male member of the United People's Liberation Party, who is not comfortable with Madam Bisi's advocacy for equal partnership with the male counterparts cautions her thus:

Sani: Equal this, equal that; what is all this noise about equal partnership?
Haba, Madam Bisi, be careful; don't push the women too hard. Political positions will wear them out (P.5)

Another problem that militates against women's active participation in politics is the fact that most political parties in Nigeria hold their political meetings at night. This makes it difficult for women to participate actively in politics as women who participate in nocturnal meetings are stigmatized by their husbands and even fellow women.

Deep-rooted Cultural Beliefs

Several cultural practices and customs in Nigeria subjugate women to men and degrade their self-esteem. For example, most Nigerian nations have a long-standing cultural idea that women are weaker than men by nature. They are to be seen not heard. Having children and taking care of the house is their main responsibility in society. Thus, seeking for female political leadership especially the presidency position in Nigeria is a herculean task.

Socio-economic factors

Because women are excluded from public life, including political activities, it is extremely difficult to find female political leadership, particularly in Nigeria. In fact, many male politicians find it impossible to imagine a Nigerian woman becoming president, and they would all flee to Chad, Equatorial Guinea, or Cameroun, respectively, if this were to happen (P. 38). Women's cultural experiences of discrimination place them at a disadvantageous economic position because they do not own resources; they are typically co-owners and, as such, property lies in the hands of men (Oni and Segun, 2012, Par.1). Women cannot afford to pay the high rate of registration and nomination fees and finance the kind of expensive electioneering campaigns required to mobilize supporters and voters to guarantee success at the poll. (Eze, 2023, P.22).

Consequently, women often resort to playing a second fiddle. However, in *More Than Dancing*, women have refused to play a second fiddle. When Sani reminds Ebele Of the cost implication of politics, she tells him:

Ebele: Alhaji, enough of that. You can no longer scare us with that.
It is already a time-worn tale. We have heard it over and over again.
Money is no longer a barrier to us. We are equal to the task" (P.3).

Political Godfatherism, Thuggery and Gangsterism

The issues of gangsterism, thuggery, and political godfatherism are among the many obstacles that stand in the way of female parity in Nigerian politics. Political godfathers feel that men are easier

to persuade and reach an understanding with, thus they prefer to work with them. The current state of affairs does not ensure that women will eventually have an equal playing field with men (Chidinma, 2023 P.21). In addition to the demeaning notion that women endured, men also violently fight women to stop them from realizing their ambition to hold political leadership positions. As a result, they employ all kinds of coercion and violence to thwart the political ambitions of women. For example, as the male UPLP meeting at the party secretariat goes on, the males disclose that they plan to use violence to thwart women's aspirations to hold political leadership positions. "We will let them know that they are up for a fight," declares Sonsare (P. 30).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a textual analytical approach to data analysis since Salami-Agunloye's *More Than Dancing* is the source of the data used in the analyses. In order to identify the main concerns, the writer wants to get over, the study include a close reading and critical interpretation of the text. These concerns are talked about in terms of Nigerian women's leadership and political engagement.

Data Presentation and Discussion

The play, *More Than Dancing*, opens with Madam Bisi, the leader of the women's wing of the United People's Liberation Party, protesting against the marginalization of women. When the women dance troupe is invited to perform, she rebukes them thus:

Bisi: Stop drumming! Stop dancing! Stop immediately! Stop! Stop, I say!!! Enough of dancing! Enough! Enough! Year in year out, primaries come and party elections go, all we do is dance. Is dancing all we can do? Is that all we are known for?..... Look at the high table (points at the top row where dignitaries are seated). How many women do you see up there? ... Look at us.... Dancing and collecting two bags of rice, one bag of salt, one carton of magi cubes and two wrappers to be shared among thirty-five women! Women, these are distractions. (P.1)

The party elders become enraged with her for scattering the dancers. The women get together later to discuss the day's events. While some of the women doubt the radical nature of their action, the majority of them support Madam Bisi. With a pledge to back Professor Nona Odaro throughout the election, they proceed to choose her as their presidential candidate. After returning home, Professor Nona muses over the choices made by her fellow women. Suddenly, she enters a trance in which historical Nigerian heroines appear to her and urge her to take the lead. She abruptly awakens and decides to continue the fight. She declares:

Nona: I am ready! Here am I. I am ready to go all the way (P.29).

The revolutionary action of the women has caused some concern to men. They also meet to re-strategize to forestall the possibility of women realizing their dream of raising a female presidential candidate. They begin to express their fears thus:

Balat: The women have carried out their threat. They have gone ahead to present their own presidential candidate to the chairman.

Sonsare: They say they are tired of dancing. They claim they have been marginalized (Pp. 30-31).

They also make fun of the women's demands. Hakeem advises them to allow the women a chance to rule since they have also come of age, but his advice is not taken seriously by the men. Senator Terna rather voices the hidden motive of the men during their meeting when he says:

We called this meeting to stop women from contesting for presidency. We called this meeting to distract women from desiring to participate. We succeeded in the past, we will succeed again. They demand for political space, we want them to know that there is no vacancy (P.34).

As the discussion progresses at the party secretariat, the men reveal their intention to deploy violence in their bid to stop women's quest for political leadership. Sonsare says, "we will let them know that they are up for a fight" (P.30). Madu also maintains that women have no place in politics, especially in African politics or decision making process. He declares: "we will fight them with our last drop of blood!"(P. 30). Senator Terna also voices the hidden motive of the men during the meeting when he says:

We called this meeting to stop women from contesting for presidency. We called this meeting to distract women from desiring to participate. We succeeded in the past, we will succeed again. They demand for political space, we want them to know that there is no vacancy (P.34).

However, despite the threat of men, Nona, the female presidential contender, is not going to give up. Every time she considers abandoning the women's mandate, historical Nigerian heroines materialize before her eyes, dramatizing the struggles they overcame to preserve their civilizations. When Nona, the symbol of Nigerian women, is assiduously nominated by her peers to select a flag-bearer for the presidential election, these legends are incorporated into the play to inspire and motivate her to rise to the occasion. Therefore, it can be concluded that women's movements have played a significant role in the rise in women's political participation in recent years.

The history of "Inikpi" of the Igala is that she gave her precious life to liberate the Igala people from the Benin forces. This emphasizes the self-sacrificing and desirous nature of the Nigerian women that has been on record. Queen Amina of Zazzau is also known to have established the Hausa Empire. This dramatic strategy, which is a reenactment of the roles of the Nigerian female legends in *More Than Dancing*, is a patriotic act for Nigerian women to take a cue for altruistic service to the country.

In fact, her combat skills were so amazing that she was able to show off strength comparable to or greater than that of men. Queen Idia of Benin also maintained her military prowess over the Igala when they were about to overrun the Benin kingdom. Moremi the spy, in a similar spirit, risked being captured in order to gain knowledge of the tactics and strategies of Igbo warfare and ultimately emerged victorious over them. Queen Kambasa of Bonny also led battles conquering other kingdoms nearby. Mama Tinubu of Lagos is rumored to have fought to have Oba Dosumu in Lagos crowned by facing the colonial masters. By elevating Oba Ewuarc to the throne, Emotan of Benin single-handedly battled for peace and justice in the Benin kingdom; Nwanycruwa of Aba remained steadfast and helped put an end to the Aba women's riot of 1929; Fumilayo of the then-National council for Nigeria and Cameroon (N.C.N.C.) led an advocacy group on women's right to vote and be elected; and Gambo Sawaba of the Northern Elements People's Union (N.E.P.U.) was a pioneer of women's involvement in politics during a period when it was taboo for women to engage in politics, particularly in Northern Nigeria.

The following scene shows Nona's husband arriving to meet her in her office, only to be turned away. After losing his temper, he storms inside the office. Nona is thinking about abandoning the women's mandate once more. She now enters a trance once more, and as is customary, historical heroine foremothers appear to her and give her confidence to continue fighting. The men people, unsettled by the women's sudden unanimity, summon Madam Ebele, a prominent woman in their party and the head of the market ladies, to a friendly negotiation. When she does, she declares that the women will not support any presidential candidate save Professor Nona. She says:

Ebele: The national Association of market women have asked me to tell you that the only candidate they are ready to vote for is Nona Odaro(P.72)

The men offer her two million naira with a promise to add another five million naira later, yet Madam Ebele turns down the offer. The men are bent on dividing the women so that they lose focus.

The women still rejected the idea, even after the men declare at a subsequent meeting that they will consider Nona for the vice president post. They are adamant that either Nona or no one should be president. The women continue by pasting posters of their candidate everywhere. Eventually, a few guys board Professor Nona's campaign. When the votes are counted, Nona, the female

presidential candidate, wins by a significant margin. For the majority of Nigerian female political activists, this has been their ultimate goal. Though it was the playwright's creative idea, their desire was realized in *More Than Dancing*.

According to Paul Tse , "This is a clear indication that no matter how long it takes, no matter how rough the road is, Nigerian women will one day have cause to smile and as such should not give up" (Tse, 2010, P. 118). A patriotic act, the dramatic strategy, which reenacts the roles of the Nigerian female legends in *More Than Dancing*, is a way for Nigerian women to take a cue for altruistic service to the country; in the play, Nona is made to get her signal in vision through the magnificent ways of these past Nigerian heroines as moderated by Mama Nigeria.

According to the Igala people's history, "Inikpi" sacrificed her life to free her people from the Benin soldiers. This highlights the documented qualities of selflessness and desirability among Nigerian women. The Hausa Empire is credited to Queen Amina of Zazzau as well. She was so amazing in combat that she showed strength on par with or even greater than that of men. Moreover, Queen Idia of Benin maintained her military superiority against the Igala when they were on the verge of overthrowing the Benin kingdom. In a similar spirit, Moremi the spy took a chance by letting herself be apprehended in order to discover the tactics and strategies of Igbo warfare, and she ultimately defeated them. Bonny's queen kambasa also led troops in campaigns to subjugate nearby kingdoms. History claims that Mama Tinubu of Lagos battled against the colonial rulers to get Oba Dosumu crowned in Lagos. Emotan of Benin battled alone to elevate Oba Ewuarc to the throne and bring justice and peace to the Benin kingdom. Aba's Nwanyeruwa remained steadfast and encouraged the 1929 Aba women's rebellion. Fumilayo led an advocacy group on women's voting and election rights in Abeokuta, where she was the head of the National Council for Nigeria and Cameroon (N.C.N.C.). During a period when women were not allowed to engage in politics, particularly in Northern Nigeria, Gambo Sawaba of the Northern Elements People's Union (N.E.P.U.) was also at the forefront of women's political participation.

Tse Paul (2010, p. 119) claims that this play depicts the political climate in Nigeria, where patriarchy is the dominant social structure. One idea that helps to understand gender inequalities is patriarchy. In its literal sense, it means "the rule of the father," but in a broader sense, it describes a society in which men predominate over women (Agbalajobi, 2010, P.78). The majority of African countries now have a structure in place that gives men a higher social position than women. Particularly in Nigeria, it is a well-known fact that most Nigerian males still believe that they have the sole right to leadership and are therefore unwilling to permit women to participate equally in politics. In the play, Sani asks the questions that reflect the thoughts of Nigerian men:

Sani: Who will give the presidential seat to a woman? In this country? Wa
la hi ta la hi, the day a women becomes the president of this country, I will

cross over to Chad. A woman will not rule me. Allah forbid(P.38).

However, Hakeem, one of the male characters in the play rejects the old order as he laments the exclusion of women from the decision-making positions. He says:

Hakeem: The continued exclusion of women from the decision-making position in the nation will slow down the pace of development in the democratic process and stunt the economic growth of the nation (P.35).

Tse agrees with Hakeem on this point. He contends that Nigeria has suffered more negative effects than positive ones as a result of women's exclusion from the political and decision-making processes. He goes on to say that the situation of average Nigerians has not been improved in any way by the men from Nigeria who have ruled the nation since independence (2010, p. 120). Tse believed that if women had been permitted to participate in the decision-making process, Nigeria could have been in a better place now. It is important to highlight that, as Emmanuel Ebo correctly pointed out, Hakeem is one of the progressive males in their party who recognizes the need for a democratic shift that would lead to adequate participation of women in the political process in Nigeria (Ebo, 2009, P. 403).

Hakeem goes on to argue that men's and women's perspectives must be included in democracy. Given that women make up half of the country's population, this is now absolutely necessary. Nona takes a stance in agreement with Hakeem. In *More Than Dancing*, she demonstrates that in a culture where men predominate, the peaceful and equal coexistence of both genders is contingent upon socio-political and economic empowerment. She says:

Nona: UPLP is for all of us, male and female, remove the women from it, the men will be stranded, removethe men and the women will be no more too... We cannot stand on our own. The same goes for the men. We need one another (P.7).

The play *More Than Dancing* by Salami-Agunloye is a propaganda. The primary goal of the novel, being a propagandist drama, is persuasion. Therefore, it aims to provoke action. Women are supposed to despise obscurity and embrace the spotlight in order to gain power (Ekpe 2003, xiii). But the dramatist also helps us realize that empowerment comes from discussion, compromise, and understanding rather than from using force. The playwright demonstrates that even though the women rebel or protest against the men, they do so peacefully, adhering to their traditional roles as women while raising men's awareness of the need to support equality and women's empowerment in our political environment.

CONCLUSION

As we've seen from the previous sections, women have long struggled for political empowerment. Salami-Agunloye's play, *More Than Dancing*, portrays the maturation of the female characters while also showcasing her opposition to gender-based discrimination and the exclusion of women from both elective and appointed posts. Here, the dramatist shows how women have achieved success in a variety of human endeavours that were formerly thought to be exclusive to men. The play's struggle for female political leadership culminates in Professor Nona Odaro becoming the first female president of Nigeria. Thus, at least in the realm of her play, Salami-Agunloye's vision regarding the potential for the rise of a female president in Nigeria is eventually achieved. Therefore, Salami-Agunloye seems to be implying that the feminist goal of having a female president of Nigeria is achievable and might eventually come to pass.

REFERENCES

- Dare,A.& Folorunso, Aluko (2010)."Women and Political Participation in Nigeria", European Journal of Social Sciences, Vol. 14. No.2
- Ebo, E.(2009). "Women Empowerment and the Ideology of Revolt in Irene Salami-Agunloye's *More Than Dancing* and *Sweet Revenge*." In E.U.Idegu (ed.) *Feminist Aesthetics and Dramaturgy of Irene Salami-Agunloye*. Kaduna: T.W. . Press and Publishers (396-416)
- Ekpe, M. (2003). Introductory Note to *More Than Dancing*. Jos : Saniez Publications.
- Eze.C.E.(2023).“Gender and politics in Nigeria.” *IAA Journal of Social Sciences*,Kampala International University, (IAA-JSS)9(1):19-24
- Eziechine,A.O. (2019). *Waves of Violence*. Enugu: CNC Publications
- Lar,I.B.(2022). “The Feminist Quest for Political Leadership and its Realisation in Irene Salami-Agunloye’s *More Than Dancing*.” In I. Salami-Agunloye (ed.) *Retelling History, Restaging African Women in Drama and Film*, Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited(55-76)
- Oni,S.&Segun,J.(2012).”Gender Relations in Nigeria’s Democratic Governance,” **Journal of Politics and Governance**, Vol. 1. No. 2/3, pp.4-15
- Tijimc, Justin A. (2009). "Negotiating Gender Equality and Equity for Women Empowerment in the 21st Century Nigeria: a Critique of Irene Salami-Agunloye's *More Than Dancing*" in Emmy Unuja klegu (cd) *Feminist Aesthetics and Dramaturgy of Irene Salami-Agunloye*.Kaduna:T.W.Press&Publishers.
- Tse,A.P.(2010). "Towards an Improved Political Participation by Nigerian Women: An Evaluation of Irene Salami's *More than Dancing*", *Jos Journal of Humanities*, 3rdQuarters, Vol.1, No. 1.Faculty of Arts, University of Jos, Nigeria.